



## UNEASY LISTENING

THE SOUNDS OF BRITAIN'S HAUNTED LANDSCAPES

TOO MANY SPOOKS GERMANY'S OVERWORKED GHOSTBUSTER

LIFE AFTER EXTINCTION? ON THE TRAIL OF THE CASPIAN TIGER

DODGING THE BULLET SERVICEMEN SAVED BY LUCKY BIBLES

ZIMBABWE GOBLIN PANIC • BIPEDAL CATS • PABLO ESCOBAR'S GHOST • YETI FINGERNAIL

THE WORLD OF

STRANGE PHENOMENA

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# ForteanTimes

FT379 MAY 2019 £4.50

THE  
WORLD'S  
WEIRDEST  
NEWS

## PROTECT AND SURVIVE

DARK TOURISM,  
NUCLEAR NOSTALGIA  
AND THE THREADS OF  
BRITISH DYSTOPIA

## PANIC IN THE PLAYGROUND

SCHOOL SCARES FROM  
ASTROSNACKS TO THE  
MOMO CHALLENGE

## TERROR AT TURTLE CREEK

WEIRD WINGED  
WITCHES OVER  
WISCONSIN







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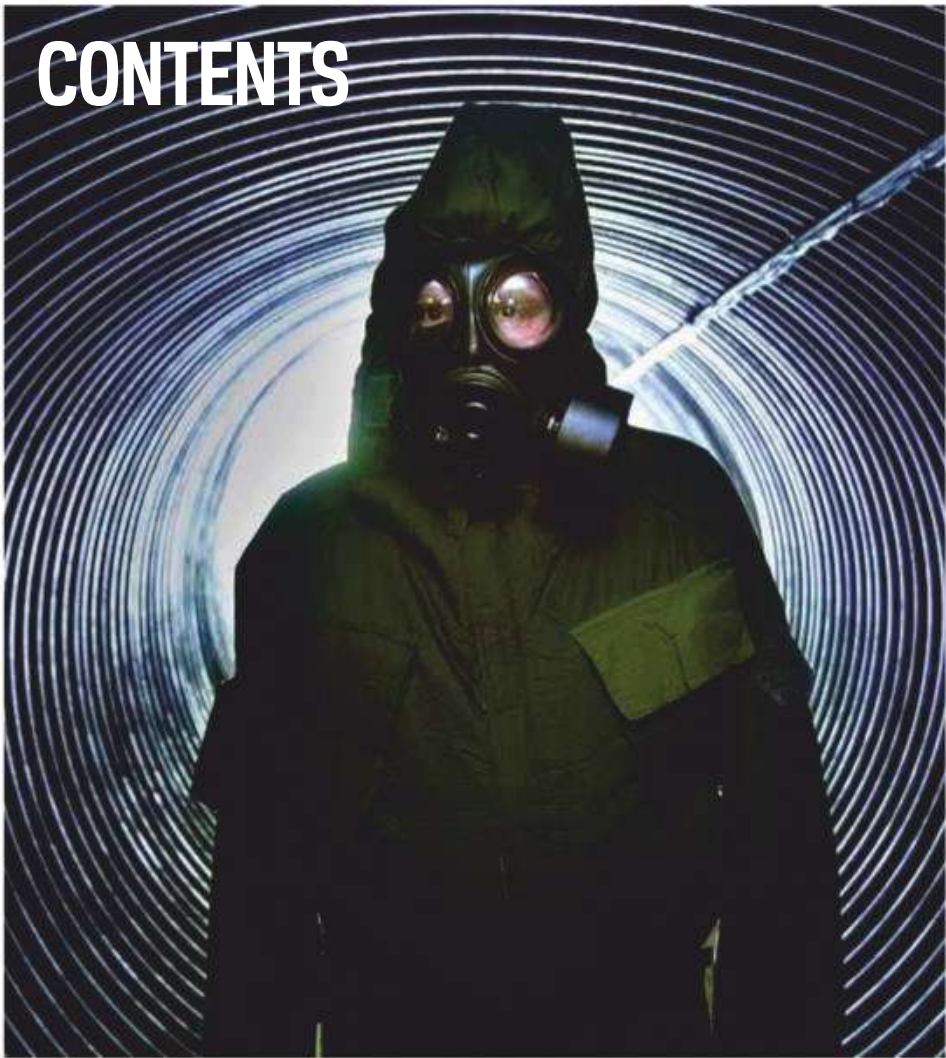


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FINAL IMAGE COMPOSITION: ETIENNE GILFILLAN



# FORTEAN TIMES 379

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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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## STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Wisconsin's winged witches, goblins panic, bipedal cats, weird skies and more...

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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

### NUCLEAR NOSTALGIA

If, like James Bond's boss M in the film  
of *Casino Royale*, you ever find yourself  
missing the Cold War, then you'll feel right  
at home with our May issue. As two of our  
features suggest, though, the Cold War felt  
distinctly hot to many in the 1980s, when  
a generation of young Britons grew up  
haunted by the threat of mutually assured  
destruction, their nightmares of nuclear  
annihilation mirrored (and probably  
stoked) by pop cultural artefacts ranging  
from Frankie Goes to  
Hollywood songs to  
high-profile BBC TV  
series like *Threads*.  
Dark tourist HE Sawyer  
invites readers to  
step back in time and  
explore the Kelvedon  
Hatch Secret Nuclear  
Bunker (p30), an eerie  
alternate reality and a  
grim reminder of the  
probable consequences  
of a nuclear attack on  
Britain. Andy Paciorek,  
meanwhile, turns to  
the television drama of the period and  
teases out some of the strands of British  
dystopian fiction that fed into the small-  
screen Armageddons of the 1980s, from the  
mass deaths of John Wyndham's novels to  
the *Survivors* of Terry Nation's classic series  
(p38). And Bob Fischer, another member  
of the 'Haunted Generation', is back with  
a round-up of contemporary hauntological  
responses to the tensions and tropes of the  
era (p37).



### URI BREAKS BREXIT

In his recent *Strange Statesmen* column  
on 'Brexit Babylon' (FT378:52-55), SD  
Tucker was unconvinced that Britain  
would be leaving the European Union  
on 29 March – and, it transpires, he was  
right to be, although he failed to predict  
the exact reason. Turns out it wasn't the  
inability of our fractious Parliament to  
agree a way forward that led to the delay,  
but the staggering psychic powers of world-  
renowned spoon bender and self-confessed  
'mental' Uri Geller!

On 22 May, Uri – a one-time constituent  
of Theresa May, who even visited his  
Berkshire home – used social media to  
send an open letter to the Prime Minister  
in which he said he would be using his  
formidable powers ("validated by the CIA,

MI5 and Mossad") to influence events and  
ensure that Brexit would be prevented:  
"I feel psychically and very strongly that  
most British people do not want Brexit. I  
love you very much but I will not allow you  
to lead Britain into Brexit. As much as I  
admire you, I will stop you telepathically  
from doing this – and believe me I am  
capable of executing it. Before I take this  
drastic course of action, I appeal to you to  
stop the process immediately while you still  
have a chance. Although I currently live in

Israel I am still a British  
citizen and feel very  
passionately about the  
country and the people I  
came to love."

Uri claimed also to be  
focusing his energies on  
"ensuring that Jeremy  
Corbyn never gets the  
keys to Number 10  
Downing Street, with  
the power of my mind  
which I have proved over  
and again. I will ensure  
that they bend out of all  
proportion to ensure that

he never takes up residence there."

And the leaking pipes in the House of  
Commons that caused a suspension of  
Brexit business? Uri again: "I said earlier  
in my open letter that I think you all need  
sacking, well I can't sack you – but I can  
soak you!"

### FAKE FORTEAN TIMES ALERT!

It has come to our attention that someone  
is running a fake Fortean Times Instagram  
account, and has been doing so for some  
time. We would like to make it quite clear  
to readers that while the account may  
look genuine, it is not administered by  
us or by our publisher. We have no idea  
why someone would pretend to be *Fortean  
Times*, but if you're reading this, then we  
would politely ask you to stop before it  
becomes a matter for Dennis Publishing's  
legal team. We'd also suggest that any of  
the 500 or so people following the 'fake FT'  
might want to stop doing so, just in case  
there is something more nefarious than  
impersonation and infringement going on.

David R Sutton

Bob Rickard

Paul Sieveking



# NO NEED TO SEARCH THE SKIES

THE PERFECT  
**ForteanTimes**  
GIFT IS CLOSER  
TO HOME



T-SHIRT



MUG



TEA TOWEL

DISCOVER FT'S NEW RANGE OF GIFTS AT  
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## A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## BIG CATS IN CORNWALL... AND BEYOND

A new 'Beast of Bodmin' on the prowl in Cornwall, and an unusual garden raider in St Albans



OLLY FAIRBROTHER

TAMBAKO THE JAGUARR / CREATIVE COMMONS

**ABOVE LEFT:** The ABC caught on CCTV in Olly Fairbrother's St Albans garden. **ABOVE RIGHT:** One possible identity for the intruder is the Asian leopard cat.

Last March, a pet Labrador called Marley was mauled in Harrowbarrow, near Callington in Cornwall. Attending the scene, police took casts of paw prints measuring nearly 5in (13cm), which the RSPCA identified as those of a big cat. "Over the last couple of weeks we have seen this large black cat walking down the back wall of the field at the back of our garden," said Marley's owner, James Stephenson, 23. "It's on a stone wall, often carrying something the size of a lamb. Whatever it's been carrying is about a foot off the ground so it's very big. We've not paid it much attention because they normally shy away from humans. It got our attention most when we were out in the garden last Thursday night [28 March]. Marley is a rescue dog so he now has almost an acre of garden when, before, he lived in a confined space. He loves his garden."

He said Marley was suddenly taken down to the ground at a distance of 20ft (6m). He thought his agile dog had tripped on something and hurt himself. "He was covered in blood. He had a

big deep gash on his front left leg and one between his toes. On his left shoulder was a big black claw mark, as if a muddy claw had scraped down the side of him... The RSPCA said [the big cat] had probably already caught something and was eating it in our garden and that's why it didn't take Marley, it was just protecting its food when it took him down."

On 30 March, Mr Stephenson saw two large green eyes reflecting in the beam of his torch at the bottom of the garden. "I shouted to it and was waving my arms around and it actually started to run towards me. That's very unusual for a big cat." He managed to get back into the house and close the door. He said there had been talk of a "puma or panther" in the village for several weeks and four or five domestic cats had gone missing in the previous week. One neighbour told him there used to be many deer in a certain field, but there hadn't been any for four or five months. A local farmer believed he had found a big cat's 'den' as he noticed a pile of wood chippings and

logs in an area of undisturbed woodland. Harrowbarrow is about 10 miles (16km) from Bodmin Moor, playground of "the Beast of Bodmin". A Freedom of Information request in 2018 revealed that Devon and Cornwall Police had been called 55 times since the start of 2011 to ABC (alien/anomalous big cat) sightings. *plymouthherald.co.uk*, 4 April; *express.co.uk*, *mirror.co.uk*, 5 April; *BBC News*, 6 April 2019.

- Matthew Wild, 30, was at his girlfriend's house in Porthleven, Cornwall, on the night of 13 January 2019 when something threw itself against a window, which was slightly ajar. "It was trying to get through the window," said Wild, a martial arts fan from Helston. "I thought it had gone and went to shut the window, but it grabbed my hand. I used to work with animals and this thing was like nothing I'd ever seen. If it was standing on the floor it would be reaching about 6ft [1.8m]". It clawed him and let out a deep growl. However, he said he has "very tough skin" due to a medical condition and was not

badly injured. He didn't get a good look at the beast, as it was dark. "I would say it's a domestic cat crossed with a panther because of its tone, strength and might. It's definitely a wild cat... I phoned the police and they weren't interested and threatened to take action against me if I called again." *falmouthpacket.co.uk*, 17 Jan; *cornwalllive.com*, 18 Jan 2019.

- Meanwhile in St Albans, Hertfordshire, on 14 March CCTV caught an ABC inside the garden of Olly Fairbrother. Olly and his wife Natasha keep small animals such as 26 rabbits and some guinea pigs. The intruder had ripped a large section of bolted corrugated plastic from the roof of an enclosure. Natasha, who had spotted it three times from about 6ft to 10ft (1.8-3m) away, said its body was about 3ft (90cm) long and came up to her knee. Karl Shuker suspects it is either an Asian leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*, or a Bengal (a hybrid of *P bengalensis* and domestic cat). *Hertfordshire Advertiser*, 21 Mar 2019.





## WALKING TALL

Tales of bipedal gorillas and viral 'human' cats

PAGE 12



## PLAYGROUND PANICS

The Momo Challenge and other scarelore

PAGE 17



## FISH OUT OF WATER

Hoodwinked by an out-of-place sunfish

PAGE 23

# THE CONSPIRASPHERE

**NOEL ROONEY** marvels at how much time and money has been spent on pursuing what, to all intents and purposes, has turned out to be a conspiracy theory posing as patriotism

## THE COLLUSION DELUSION

So, there it is: the Russiagate behemoth, which has lumbered lugubriously around the Washington political scene, and the gleeful media landscape, since the pre-Trump days (remember those?) of 2016, has finally been ordered to exit stage left, clearly not pursued by a bear. Robert Mueller's 791-day investigation has ended in a report, a summary of which makes it clear that there is no incontrovertible evidence that Trump and his team colluded with Russia to influence the course of the 2016 presidential election.

This whole farrago has had conspiracy written all over it from the start. In early 2016, British ex-spook Christopher Steele compiled a dossier for the Democratic National Committee which implied that Trump was in some way under the thrall of Vladimir Putin; Steele's dossier was scurrilous in the extreme, including reports that Trump had paid Russian prostitutes to pee on the hotel bed once used by the Obamas on a state visit, among other equally unlikely bits of 'information'. But from then on the rumour mill began to inflate, with any known or suspected contacts between the Donald or his associates and Vlad or any of his 277 million citizens being taken as concrete evidence. Taken only; from the outset, the signal missing element of the case against Trump was evidence. In this instance, when the Right called conspiracy, they were correct; the Democrats had concocted a campaign of whispers, aided enthusiastically by the US intelligence community, to prevent Trump from winning, or possibly even participating in, the 2016 election. It was unedifying conspiracy theory posing as earnest patriotism: and isn't this what the Conspirasphere is accused of on a daily basis by the politically righteous?

What they have ended up doing is making him look good (an irony of some magnitude) and ensuring that next time someone accuses the Donald of nefarious

behaviour, no one is going to believe them. In some respects, it's just another petal in the confetti of high strangeness that seems to shower the man; he is now more or less conspiracy-proof as the result of a conspiracy – and moreover, any remotely questionable accusations aimed at him from liberals are going to look like prime examples of Joe Uscinski's take on the phenomenon, that "conspiracy theories are for losers".

A report by Robert Mueller was, of course, part of where Q came in and, predictably, QAnon people are busy celebrating Trump's vindication and proving that Q had it right all along, often by numerological means so arcane that I sincerely doubt anyone but the most initiated of Q-proofers has the remotest idea what they are going on about – but hey, for the majority of the QAnon community, what matters is that they can still trust the plan; the President is still winning against the Deep State, and Q is still providing the crumbs that matter. Now, of course, the Mueller report Q referred to in those early posts was in fact a secret report; this Mueller report is not a secret report at all, it's a non-secret report that we are not allowed to read, which is clearly a different species of chimera altogether.

What does it say about the world's largest democracy that contact between a presidential hopeful and a powerful rival, which might in some circumstances be considered enlightened, can turn first into a conspiratorial tsunami and then into a monumental embarrassment for the media and the Establishment? Among other things, it says that the status of conspiracy theory is perhaps higher than we have given it credit for; and the circle of those who are prepared to use it for political gain has expanded way beyond the margins. And all this because a few Russian officials were obliged to spend time explaining, patiently, why it was not appropriate to rename one of their better-known public buildings the Trump Kremlin.

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES  
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

## NEW PLAN FOR GHOST STATION

Black Country Evening Mail, 11 Feb 1999.

## Ghost staff and private gardening in 'security state'

Guardian, 19 Mar 1999.

## GHOST TRAIN AT SHIBDEN PARK

Halifax Eve. Courier, 29 July 2000.

## Police called in to investigate ghost voters

Mail on Sunday, 24 April 2005.

## 'GHOST KITCHENS' EMERGE AS DELIVERY GROWS IN POPULARITY

Toronto Star, 20 July 2018.

## Whitehall wastes taxpayer millions on 'ghost research'

Times, 2 June 2016.

## GHOST TOWN IS FORECAST

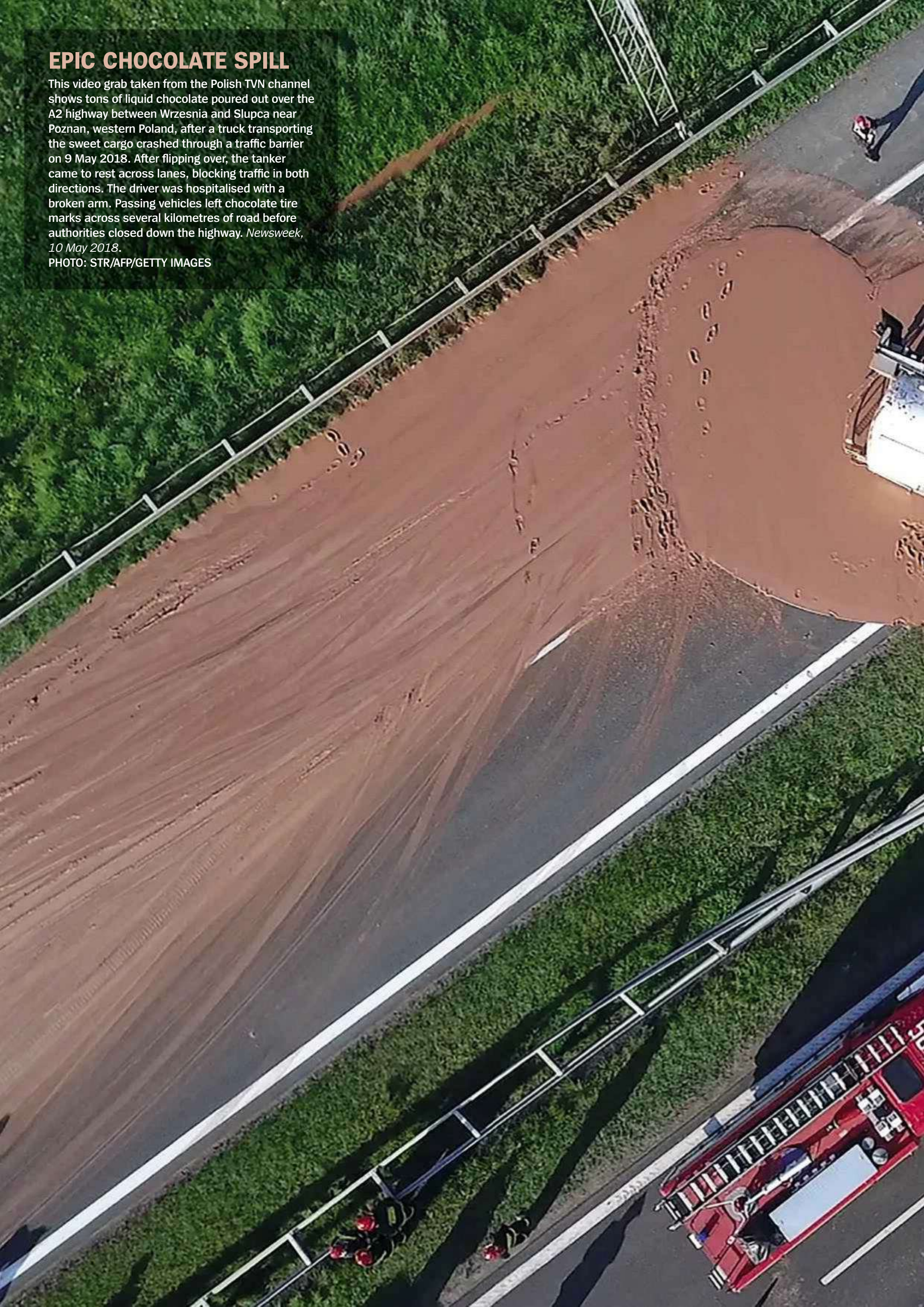
Halifax Eve. Courier, 24 Oct 2001.



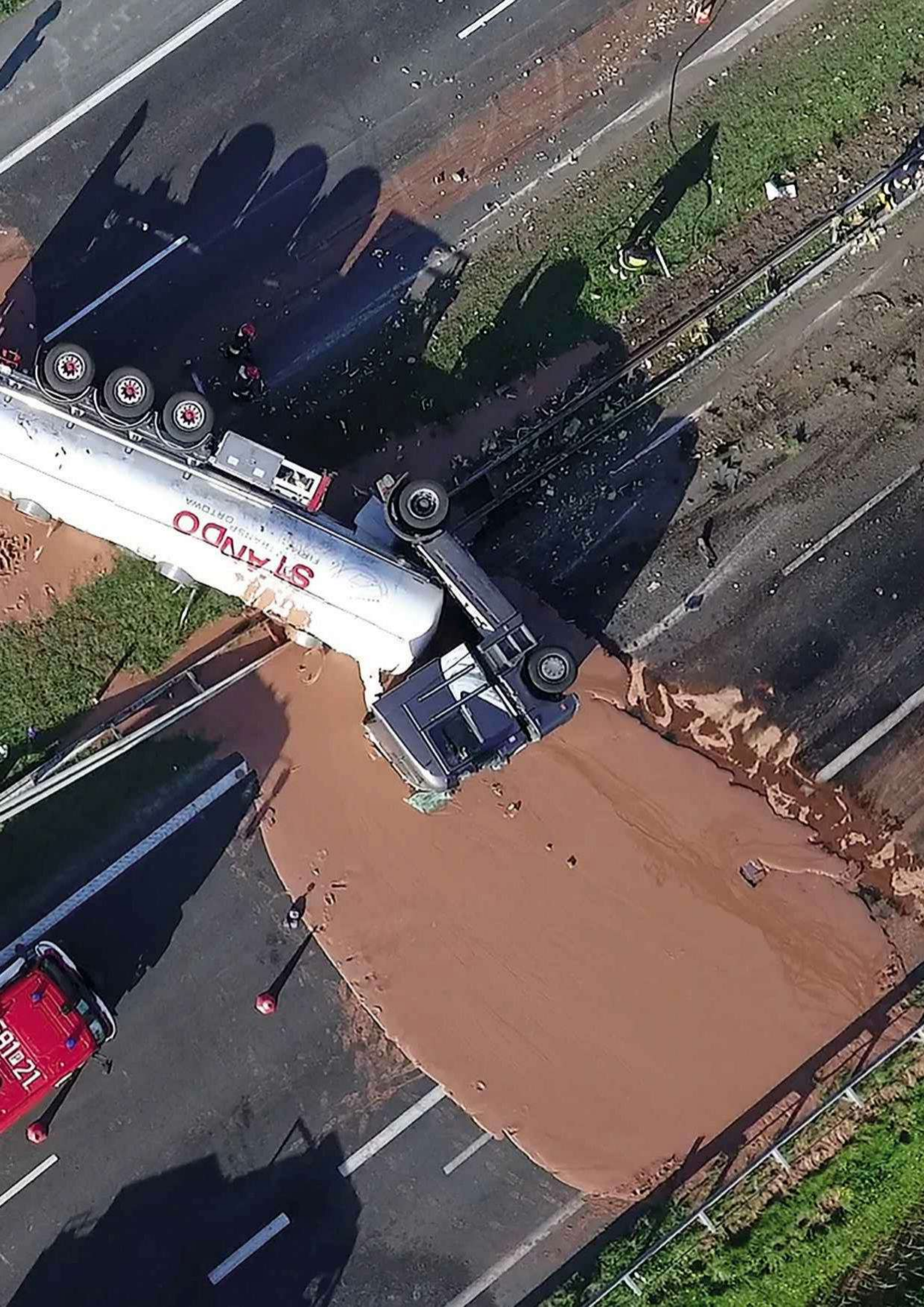
## EPIC CHOCOLATE SPILL

This video grab taken from the Polish TVN channel shows tons of liquid chocolate poured out over the A2 highway between Wrzesnia and Slupca near Poznan, western Poland, after a truck transporting the sweet cargo crashed through a traffic barrier on 9 May 2018. After flipping over, the tanker came to rest across lanes, blocking traffic in both directions. The driver was hospitalised with a broken arm. Passing vehicles left chocolate tire marks across several kilometres of road before authorities closed down the highway. *Newsweek*, 10 May 2018.

PHOTO: STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES









## SIDELINES...

### WHO'S THE DADDY?

Two Wisconsin co-workers learned they were more than just friends when a mother checked her son's Facebook and spotted his biological father among his friends' list. Nathan Boos had been friends with fellow-trucker Robert Degaro at Rock Solid Transport for two years, when one day his adoptive mother told him: "Well, you're friends with your dad on Facebook". *CNN-Wire/wfsb.com, 1 Sept 2018.*

### ALL SHOOK UP

A 3.1R earthquake hit the Home Counties at 3.42am on 27 February, rattling windows and causing a loud bang. It was centred on Newdigate in Surrey, less than 10 miles from Gatwick Airport, and was the strongest of four in the previous fortnight. It followed a 'swarm' of 16 tremors in the area between April and August 2018. The British Geological Survey said there was no evidence they were caused by oil drilling. *D.Telegraph, D.Mail, 28 Feb 2019.*

### GNOMES AT RISK

Philipp Griebel, one of Europe's last traditional manufacturers of garden gnomes, is struggling to find a successor for the 145-year-old business when owner Reinhard Griebel retires. The firm is in Gräfenroda, Thuringia, Germany, which describes itself as the birthplace of the garden gnome. *<i> 7 Mar 2019.*

### GHOST SHOOTER

Christian Devaux, 25, faced charges after firing shots inside his house in Tolland, Connecticut, on 26 July 2018. He told police he was a psychic investigator and that he was aiming at a ghost. Police said he had made a similar report back in 2011. *Chicago Tribune, 3 Sept 2018.*

MARTIN ROSS



## ENCOUNTERS

Weird winged entities over Wisconsin and California, plus a Zimbabwean goblin scare



ABOVE: A bridge over Turtle Creek, near Darien, Wisconsin, where a woman had a run-in with a winged entity. BELOW: An artistic rendering of the Lechuza, a Mexican witch who can turn into a giant bird. FACING PAGE: Mehluli Ndlovu – at war with the goblins.

### WISCONSIN'S WINGED ENTITIES

At around 5.30am on 25 February, a woman was driving towards the Turtle Creek bridge on her way to work in Darien, Wisconsin, when she observed a large winged entity at treetop level gliding towards her at a speed that was "not natural". It almost collided with the hood, before swerving and nearly hitting the guardrail. Its wingspan was much wider than her car and the body was "brownish" like a "paper bag". The body looked feminine and slight, the wings bat-shaped and very large – she didn't see them flapping. The face was unremarkable, almost "blank". She didn't notice where the creature flew after the encounter. The unnamed witness is of Hispanic descent and said that it resembled a "witch" described to her as a child. This may be related to Mexican legends of the Lechuza – an old woman, often a witch or *bruja*, who can turn into a giant black bird. In most stories, the bird is an owl, but sometimes an eagle.

The bridge crossing Turtle Creek is less than 50 miles

(80km) west of Lake Michigan, and around 30 miles (48km) southwest of the site of a winged entity sighting that occurred in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, in 2017, probably on 14 April. The witness in this case – as reported to Lon Strickler of *Phantoms and Monsters* – was in his parked minivan, talking to a friend on the phone at about 10.45pm, when he saw a very tall dark figure standing in the rain no more than 10ft (3m) away. He turned on the headlights and nervously described the entity to his friend.

"[It] looked like a 7ft [2m]

bat/reptile of some sort," he said. "The head was at the level of the roof of my minivan, or slightly more elevated than my roof, and it was standing perfectly still just staring right at me. Its eyes were large, taking up a significant portion of the thing's head, from what I could make out, and although they were dark, like large black eyeballs, there was a glint of reflection in them... I also noticed that besides the creature's height, it was quite large, possessing extraordinarily swarthy coloration, though slightly reflective, like skin or scales of some kind, not feather-







nor fur-covered from what I could tell. It was at least as wide as a very large man, but did not seem 'stocky'... I realised that it actually had huge wings, but they were wrapped around its body, exactly as a bat wraps its wings around its body while sleeping upside-down – except this thing was standing right-side-up, looking right at me, or almost 'through me'... It definitely seemed *ominous*. The bottom of its face (mouth?) was completely covered by its fleshy-looking wings wrapped around its body, and I could tell that whatever it was, it was certainly physically powerful, as the rather wide 'shoulder-wing' area appeared to show some manner of musculature. The way it was 'standing' there, it seemed to likely have a general humanoid body-shape under the wrapped wings." As he finished describing the entity to his friend, there was a brief blur in the headlights and it had gone. Maybe it had moved out of the headlight beam and flown off. He had only seen it for about 12 seconds.

According to the Singular Fortean Society, there has recently been a string of such sightings in the States bordering Lake Michigan, generally in the evening or at night, often in or near a park, and around water. Witnesses consistently describe a large, grey or black bat-like or bird-like creature – although in a small number of cases it was said to be insect-like – sometimes with glowing or reflective red, yellow, or orange eyes. Humanoid features such as arms and legs are often reported. *singularfortean.com*, 29 April, 11 Mar 2019.

## THE WINGED CRYPTID OF CAPAY VALLEY

One day in early August 2018, an unnamed woman and her friend encountered a huge flying cryptid. They had just left Cache Creek Casino Resort in Capay Valley, California, and had pulled onto Route 16 at about 11pm when a Cessna-sized 'dragon' swiftly glided over their vehicle from the



*"We want the goblins or the person behind this caught"*

rear, its mass causing the car to shudder as it passed over them. The area was well lit, allowing a good view of the creature. Its wings were bat-like with a span of around 30ft (9m), its body thin and almost humanoid. Its coloration was dark, probably black. As it flew over, it looked back with large, bright yellow eyes. The witness never saw it flap its wings, but it glided with ease and speed, and quickly ascended into the darkness.

The same witness – who related her encounter to Lon Strickler of Phantoms and Monsters website on 24 March 2019 – said that a friend saw a very similar winged cryptid in the parking lot of the Cache Creek Casino Resort at around 1am sometime in the first week of January 2019. It quickly passed overhead as they were walking to their vehicle. They also felt a slight rush of air as it flew above them. *phantomsandmonsters.com*, 25 Mar 2019.

## ZIMBABWE GOBLIN SCARE

Residents of Ziqaweni village in Zimbabwe are living in fear of attack by invisible creatures thought to be goblins. Last September, the story goes, two families lost their children to the Grim Reaper, but the goblin responsible was "destroyed by prophets". However, other alleged goblins kept mounting

attacks.

"Every morning we wake up to the death of our cattle," said an unnamed villager. "At first we thought it was a thief so we took turns in guarding the kraals in the hope of catching him. We never caught anyone, but every morning we found a dead cow in different homesteads. Last year, a cleansing ceremony was carried out when some kids mysteriously

died and we thought we would have peaceful lives. Right now we don't know how we will be helped because we believe these goblins can be killed but later on come back in full force."

"So far 30 cattle have been found dead in this area," said village head Mehluli Ndlovu. "I have also lost some of my cattle. I am now seeking divine and traditional interventions to exorcise the area. Whether it's goblins or someone using juju, we are tired and we want the goblins or the person behind this caught. I have heard complaints that the goblins are also destroying some villagers' crops. I am currently organising funds so that I can visit Chipinge to get a *tsikamutanda* [powerful traditional healer]." A villager who identified herself as MaKhumalo said: "Each household is currently contributing money to pay the person who will conduct the cleansing ceremony. We hope they will do a good job and stop this terror before it gets out of hand."

In the folklore of Zimbabwean goblins, their attacks can take many forms. Earlier in 2018, a goblin was accused of throwing stones at houses. In 2014, a police station in Bulawayo was evacuated due to goblin infestation and girls at a school in Bulawayo complained of being attacked by goblins they could see which transformed from dwarfs into baboons. A few months ago, goblins reportedly "took over" a maternity ward in Lupaka and had sex with everybody in it, as they do. *b-metro.co.zw* (Zimbabwe), 1 Mar; *mysteriousuniverse.org*, 6 Mar; *Sun*, 14 Mar 2019.

## SIDELINES...

### LUCKY CATCH

New Zealand camper Gus Hutt, fishing 100 yards from his usual spot, saw what he thought was a doll floating in the ocean. Hauling it in, he realised it was a child, 18-month-old Malachi Whyte, who had gone missing from his parents' tent a short while earlier and strayed into the sea. "It's a freakish miracle", said campsite owner Rebecca Salter. *D.Mirror*, 6 Nov 2018.

### HERMIT DIGS IN

In 1989, PE teacher Mauro Morandi, from Modena in northern Italy, was on a catamaran bound for the South Pacific when it broke down off Sardinia's Costa Smeralda, near the islet of Budelli, which he liked so much he has never left. He carved out a life as a beachcomber, earning the nickname "the Italian Robinson Crusoe". Budelli, renowned for its pink sand beaches, has now been incorporated into a national park and the authorities want Morandi to leave – but he is resisting. *D.Telegraph*, 28 Nov 2018.

### TOO DEAR TO DRINK

A Sotheby's auction in New York saw a 1945 bottle of Romanée-Conti (Burgundy) wine fetch a record price of £424,000 (\$560,000), 17 times higher than the auction house's upper estimate of £24,000 (\$31,700). Romanée-Conti is regarded as one of the world's top wine producers. *D.Telegraph*, 15 Oct 2018

### PAINFUL SWIM

A man was stung on his penis by a stingray whilst swimming at the Hainan resort city of Sanya in China. While he lay on the shore in agony, the stingray beside him, paramedics appeared and cut the venomous barb. He was then rushed to hospital. *jamaica-star.com*, 4 Sept 2018.

### CASSIE'S SURPRISE

Cassie Esplin, 25, was about to use her Buzz Tongue Finger Vibrator when there was a loud bang and the battery pack flew out and hit the ceiling, before a corroded battery landed on her, scorching her jumper and leaving a mark on her chest. The car dealership worker from Norwich had bought the toy when it was reduced from £12 to £4 on the website love-honey.co.uk – which offered her a full refund. *Sun*, 12 Jan 2019.





## SIDELINES...

### BONE FIND

On 2 January, Jemma Clarke, 25, a nurse from Clacton in Essex, found a human bone in a pair of socks bought from a Primark store in Colchester on 10 December. It was possibly from a little finger and had no skin adhering to it. A Primark spokesman speculated that it had been inserted after the socks left their supplier's factory. *Guardian, Sun, 26 Jan 2019.*

### CHERISHED LIGHTBULB

A 40-watt lightbulb bought from Woolworths in 1943 still works. Owner Valerie Beaney, 78, of Headcorn, Kent, said it became a family treasure after her mother Rose Allen gave birth to her sister Elaine under its light during the Blitz 76 years ago, her father having painted it dark blue because of the blackout. (He later scraped off the paint.) *Sun, Metro, 18 Jan 2019.*

### BIRD MAN THWARTED

A man arriving from Guyana at JFK Airport on 8 December was caught attempting to smuggle 70 live finches hidden inside hair rollers. He was sent home without his birds, which were to be entered in a high-stakes underground singing contest. Punters bet on how many times the finches chirp in a minute. A winning male finch with a good pedigree and track record can sell for up to £7,800. *NY Times, 12 Dec 2018.*

### TERRIBLE HANDWRITING

An unnamed woman from Glasgow suffered blurred vision and swollen eyelids after being prescribed erectile dysfunction cream for a dry eye. She was given antibiotics, lubricants and steroids in A&E after she used Vitaros instead of ocular lubricant Vita-POS to treat her problem. Handwritten prescriptions should be written in block capitals to minimise such errors. *BMJ Case Reports, via sky.com, 8 Jan; Sun, 9 Jan 2019.*



MARTIN ROSS

## STRANGE SKIES

Blue flashes, ominous green clouds and a mystery twister over Salisbury Plain



NPAS

• A mysterious blue flash lit up the North Wales sky at 6.30am on 7 February. It was captured on dashcam by a member of the National Police Air Service, who was in Deeside travelling towards Northop on the A55.

Martine Jeffrey witnessed the flash near Dobshill roundabout while on her way to work with her boyfriend. "We were driving from Wrexham towards Deeside and all of a sudden the whole sky went bright blue as if there was a huge explosion," she said. "It lasted for about four seconds, then it just completely

disappeared. At first I thought it was lightning, but there were no fork marks in the sky and there wasn't anything like a rumble of thunder that followed." The Meteorological Office suggested it might have been a lightning strike or a power surge, although nothing had showed up on their recording equipment.

New York experienced a similar phenomenon on 28 December last year when the skyline turned a bright blue, mystifying onlookers. Social media users joked that the plot of the recently released

*Into the Spiderverse* (in which a giant particle collider opens a multidimensional rift) had become a reality; in fact, the strange light was caused by a transformer explosion at a Con Edison power station in the Astoria neighbourhood of Queens. *Daily Post (Wales), 8 Feb 2019.*

• A spooky sight appeared over Sydney just before Christmas when a thundercloud lit up with an unearthly green glow. A developing storm erupted into a violent hailstorm. Hailstones the size of tennis balls smashed roofs and windows in thousands of homes, battered cars and brought down phone and power lines. Damage was spread across New South Wales, although Sydney was hardest hit.

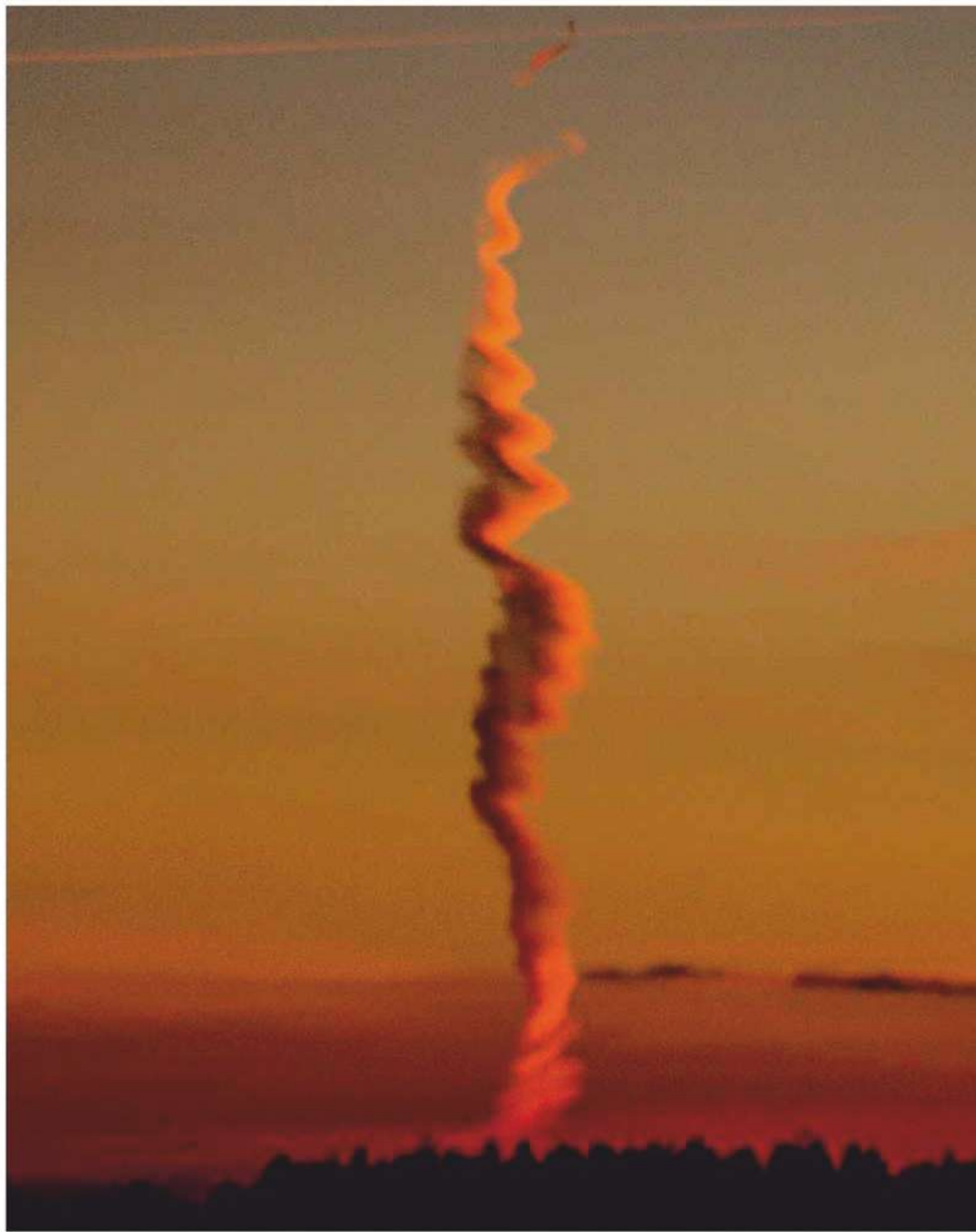
Menacing green thunderclouds have been reported elsewhere, including the UK, usually before an intense thunderstorm, and often with large hailstones or tornados. Such a cloud heralded a swarm of 148 tornados in April 1974, that left 330 people dead and another 5,484 injured across a large swathe of the US.



ROB LORD / FACEBOOK

**TOP:** The mysterious blue flash that lit up the sky in North Wales was captured on this dashcam footage. **ABOVE:** This photo showing an unearthly green glow in the clouds was taken by Rob Lord from Merewether Ocean Bath, just north of Sydney.





DAVID HARGRAVE / SWNS

**ABOVE:** Experts have been left scratching their heads over this mysteriously shaped spiral cloud photographed by David Hargrave.

For a long time, green storm clouds were dismissed as a figment of the imagination, but their authenticity was confirmed in 1995, when a scientist from the University of Oklahoma measured the colour of light from thunderstorms and found that greenish-yellow and greenish-blue often appear before severe storms. Their cause is at present unknown. *Paul Simons's 'Weather Eye', Times, 4 Jan 2019.*

- Spiralling vertically in the sky and tinted red by the setting sun,

this slender vapour formation over Salisbury Plain looked very much like a tornado, a vapour trail from a jet, or even a rocket launch. But the wisp, caught by dog-walker David Hargrave at Sidbury Hill in Wiltshire at 5pm on 5 February, left experts baffled. It was about 30 miles (48km) away, in the direction of Westbury. Land nearby is a Ministry of Defence testing range, but the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, part of the MoD that administers Army operations on Salisbury Plain,

was not aware of any military training that could have caused it. Still, the image strongly resembles those of known rocket launches and while the official silence surrounding the mysterious cloud is unusual, it's not unprecedented. Evidence of seemingly secret "black" launches is being caught on camera around the world with increasing frequency even as government officials deny knowledge of the obvious. *D.Telegraph, D.Mail, D.Mirror, 9 Feb; mysteriousuniverse.org, 14 Feb 2019.*

## SIDELINES...

### TRUSTY HOOVER

Val Marks, 70, bought herself a second-hand vacuum cleaner to celebrate her marriage in 1965 – and it's still going strong – though her husband left her in 1975. The refurbished Hoover Junior 1334A, made in 1962, cost her £20 in her hometown of Rotherham. *D.Mail, 1 Jan 2019.*

### NOSE RING

Abigail Thompson, found a ring she had lost for 12 years – after she sneezed. The beautician, from Keighley, West Yorkshire, lost it in 2007, shortly after her eighth birthday. She could not remember getting it stuck up her nose. "We thought it was stolen," she said. *D.Express, 29 Jan 2019.*

### AERIAL WARFARE

Over millions of years, moths have developed "stealth coating" similar to those on military aircraft to avoid being eaten by bats. The furry coating on the moths' thorax absorbs the sonar signals bats use to locate their prey in the same way as the coating on stealth fighters and bombers soaks up enemy radar. *D.Telegraph, 7 Nov 2018.*

### OUTFOXED

Personal assistant Jodie Nailard, 22, woke up in her south London home one night to find herself covered in blood. A fox had crept in via the patio doors and had bitten her on her arm six times as she slept. "There is no way I am opening the door again at night", she said. *D.Telegraph, 22 June 2018.*

### CLASSY BIRD

A stowaway myna bird upgraded itself to Business Class on a Singapore Airlines flight from Changi to Heathrow. Facebook footage shows airline staff capturing the feathery freeloader, which was quarantined upon landing. *BBC News, 14 Jan 2019.*



MARTIN ROSS





# STRANGE DAYS

## SIDELINES...

### CLIFFHANGER

Swerving to avoid an animal on a winding stretch of California's Highway 1 in her SUV, Angela Hernandez, 23, plunged 200ft (60m) down sheer cliffs at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. She managed to exit her partially submerged vehicle but was unable to climb back up the cliffs. She survived by drinking the car's radiator water. After seven days, she was found, uninjured except for a minor shoulder injury. *D.Telegraph, 16 July 2018.*

### INTO THE WOODS

Russian pensioner Viktor Vinogradov, 65, went mushroom picking in the Siberian wilderness with his dog Thor, but failed to return. Three weeks later both were found more than 20km (12 miles) from home; they had become lost in woods while hiding from a bear. "They lived off rowanberries", said the man's relieved daughter Tatiana. "Dad hunted mice and cooked them over a fire for the dog." *BBC News, 25 Oct 2018.*

### FOUR-LETTER WIN

Tuna Kunt, 23, has been elected president of the student union at London's City University. The female law student, originally from Turkey, hoped to maintain her cool in the face of silly jokes. *D.Star, 18 Mar 2019.*

### NICE TO FIND YOU

– to find you nice. Walking by the coast at Horse Shoe Point, Lincolnshire, a couple found a German brandy bottle sealed with wax. They smashed it open to find a drawing of the TV personality Sir Bruce Forsyth (1928-2017). On the back was written "call me by letter only", but there was no return address. *D.Express, 14 Mar 2019.*

### FIRST SIGN OF MADNESS

Research at Nottingham Trent University has found that problem-solving is made easier when we think out loud. A complicated card game requiring identification of number, colour and shape sequences found that a sample group of 35 people made 45 errors when working silently, but when permitted to think out loud, describing what they were doing and their thinking processes, made just 10 mistakes. (Sydney) *D.Telegraph, 7 May 2018.*

## WALKING TALL | Gorillas and cats disagree with Orwell's adage "Four legs good, two legs bad"



ABOVE LEFT: Louis, a male gorilla from Philadelphia Zoo, became an Internet sensation after video showed him walking upright. ABOVE RIGHT: The photo of Frank that received 215,000 likes on Twitter last April. BELOW: Frog and Newt: no wheels required.

### LOUIS STRUTS HIS STUFF

In early March, keepers at the Philadelphia Zoo filmed Louis, an 18-year-old male western lowland gorilla, standing on two legs like a human, strutting from one side of his enclosure to the other, clutching some tomatoes (a special treat for him). In the caption that accompanied the eight-second video, the zoo explained that, although gorillas rarely walk on two legs, Louis (born at St Louis Zoo on 12 May 1999) had made a habit of doing so: "He can often be seen walking bipedal[ly] when his hands are full of snack[s] or when the ground is muddy (so he doesn't get his hands dirty)!" Gorillas in general "will walk upright when they're playing with each other or they're displaying to try to look big and strong... or to wade into a swamp," said Michael Stern, the curator of primates. However, while others might walk upright for a few seconds or a few steps, Louis can mosey around on his hind legs for extended periods. *Washington Post, 27 Mar 2019.*

### THE 'HUMAN CAT'

A picture of Frank, a five-month-old kitten posing on his two hind

legs went viral on Twitter last April. He was the only black and white cat in a litter of seven ginger kittens. At 10 weeks old, when owners Harry McCarthy and Paris Parnell brought him home to Romford, east London, they discovered he would "play dead" when they pretended to shoot him with two fingers. "He's nothing like my other cats, he's so clued up," said Mr McCarthy. "From the first day we had him he has always loved to try and stand up. But this was the first time we saw him stand up properly." *D.Mail, 25 April 2018.*

### BIPEDAL BROTHERS

Two kittens from the same litter were born without back legs, but take life in their stride. Frog, a tabby, and black-and-white Newt can jump and use scratching posts with no problem, using their tails to help them balance. They are being cared for at the Rescue Me Animal Sanctuary in Liverpool. Because they are thriving, there are no plans to fit them with wheels, which can happen with animals that lose their legs. The sanctuary is unaware of any other two-legged cats born in the UK. *D.Mail, 7 July 2018.*



NICK FAIRHURST / MAGNUS NEWS AGENCY



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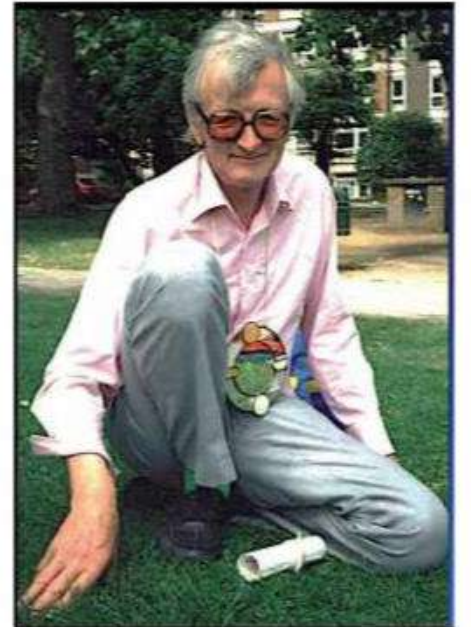
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### Further information / Mailing list:

Christine Rhone, [rhonechristine@hotmail.com](mailto:rhonechristine@hotmail.com)





PAUL SIEVEKING digs up an early example of the world's oldest board game and a Neolithic logboat

## HOUNDS AND JACKALS

Markings found carved on a cave wall in Azerbaijan are thought to be among the earliest examples of the world's oldest board game. Played by Egyptian pharaohs 4,000 years ago, "hounds and jackals" is similar to backgammon, involving a board with 58 holes. Competitors use figurines in the shape of the animals. The object is to get all pieces from one side of the board to the other. The carving, discovered in the Gobustan national park near the capital Baku, is believed to date back 4,000 years. It was recognised by Walter Crist from the American Museum of Natural History in Arizona, as he was browsing through photographs. It is a set of depressions in the same layout as a hounds and jackals board, but archaeologists at the park had not recognised it. Dr Crist was so excited that he flew to Azerbaijan the next day. "The pattern of the game is distinct, with two parallel rows of 10 spaces in the centre and an arc of 36 around the outside," he said. The arrangement of the spaces could not be coincidental: the fifth, 10th, 15th and 20th holes are always marked in the same way. This means these different societies shared knowledge of how to play the game and it could have helped them initiate social interactions leading to other kinds of relationships. "In a way, games function like language but the communication is not verbal, but through the act of play," said Dr Crist.

Versions of the game have been found in the tomb of Amenemhat IV, a pharaoh in the early 18th century BC, and at many other sites. It is thought to have been played by the elite. The carving in Azerbaijan, however, was probably made by Bronze Age nomads, suggesting that the game cut across social boundaries.



ABOVE: Walter Crist recognised these carved markings on a cave wall in Azerbaijan as a game of 'hounds and jackals'. BELOW: The discovery of a Neolithic logboat in the River Boyne.

The Gobustan national park, founded in 1966, is packed with 6,000 rock carvings, some dating back to 12,000 BC. It covers 1,000 acres in a landscape of semi-desert and boulders. UNESCO said the carvings "represent so graphically activities connected with hunting and fishing when the climate and vegetation of the area were warmer and wetter than today." Some researchers believe that other, far later, designs show Viking longboats, evidence that Scandinavians migrated to the area in about the 10th century AD. *Times*, 19 Dec 2018.

## NEOLITHIC BOAT

A logboat at least 5,000 years old has been discovered in the River Boyne near

the Brú Na Bóinne World Heritage site in Ireland. It was found in June 2016 by four local anglers while fishing on the river at Oldbridge, Co Meath, and consists of a 10ft (3m) length of wood that formed the base of the boat. It is estimated that it was originally more than 13ft (4m) long, shaped out of the trunk of an oak tree with stone axes. It is one of 11 logboats found in the River Boyne, though the first to date from the Neolithic – in this case between 3,300 and 2,900 BC, according to carbon dating. It was contemporary with the building of the ancient passage tomb complexes of Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange. *irishtimes.com*, 23 Nov 2018.

## TROPHY HEADS

Gauls cut off the heads of their enemies and displayed them for all to see, hanging around their horses' necks (as shown in sculptures of mounted warriors). Ancients text told us these heads were embalmed with cedar oil, a practice now confirmed by excavation: traces of conifer resin have been found on skulls at the Iron Age settlement of Le Cailar in the South of France. The skulls were found with weapons in an area where they would have been widely visible – suggesting they had been on display.

The skull of a beheaded Briton stuck on a pike in the 3rd century AD has been found at Vindolanda Roman fort near Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland. The remains of a dog 2,000 years old, still with its fur, was also uncovered. *Guardian*, 7 Nov; *D.Mirror*, 14 Nov 2018.







# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

## 235: CLAM UP

(For more: AC Andrews, 'Oysters as a food in Greece and Rome,' *Classical Journal* 43, 1948, 299-303; RT Gunter, 'The Oyster Culture of the Ancient Romans,' *Journal of the Marine Biological Association* 4, 1897, 360-5; H Colburn, *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, 1838, ch4, 548-57 – all online)

"The fellow who found the pearl in the oyster stew – the ring that was lost in a lake, and then what was found when a fish was caught... Out of dozens of reported pearls in stews, most likely there have been instances; and it could be that once upon a time somebody did get a ring back fishwise" – Fort, *Books*, p864

Fort's 'somebody' was actually one of his 'thrice-accursed Greeks', namely tyrant Polycrates who (Herodotus, bk. 3, chs40-3) flung a valuable ring into the sea, only to have it turn up in a finny friend presented to him by a local fisherman.

Massachusetts policeman Mike Serino found a pea-sized pearl in his birthday oyster stew, sold at auction for \$16,500 (*National Geographic*, 20 Mar 2015). Much larger ones have been found. Most notably, one reported by Colburn (above – also in Massachusetts) requiring "four men to swallow it whole".

Thanks to Aphrodite rising at birth from the sea-foam upon a shell, a Madonna-like apparition immortalised by Botticelli, the supposed aphrodisiac property of oysters was early established.

"Oysters is amorous, lobsters is lecherous, but shrimps, Christ!" – Colin Dexter, *The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn*, parodying a traditional lay – oodles of websites on its diverse histories.

Casanova, who ate 50 a day, often a dozen for breakfast – reported (*History of My Life*, bk4 ch3) that after an oyster dinner he managed a non-stop seven-hour fuckathon with his lucky lady – a lot tastier pick-me-up than Viagra...

Shakespeare extended this mollusc's power: "The world's mine oyster" (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2. 2) – or, in London commuter terms, mine Oyster Card.

Aristotle, who investigated sea-life in a lagoon on Lesbos, believed oysters spontaneously generated from their natal mud, and "made one" by re-creating the ideal physical birth conditions – cf. his *History of Animals*, plus Armand Marie



Leroi, *The Lagoon: How Aristotle Invented Science* (2014, pp225-9).

Pliny, *Natural History*, bk32 ch21 para60, and Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, bk20 ch8 paras3-4, citing previous authorities, believed oysters grew in size according to lunar phases.

Oysters had a political presence in fifth-century Athens, their shells being used along with potsherds for voters to inscribe the name of the politician they wished to ostracise – a procedure overdue for revival.

Rome's first influential ostreologist was Sergius Orata (first-century BC). Glimpsing a big niche market, he developed such new breeding techniques as surrounding oysters with twigs to which their young ('spats' – not the kind you wear) would attach themselves, thus ready for easy transplantation, leading to mass creation of artificial oyster beds – Aristotle would have been impressed. Orata ('Golden One') made a fortune out of this and his other inventions of underfloor hypocaust heating and therapeutic thermal hanging baths – certainly healthier than sun-beds.

Countless websites assure you Roman Emperor Vitellius (AD 69) ate 1,000 oysters at a sitting. No mention in the chief sources (Suetonius and Dio Cassius), which catalogue his Mr Creosote-style gluttonies. Still, he has a fortean presence, his doom being presaged by a comet, double lunar and solar eclipses, mysterious huge footprints on the Capitol (Bigfoot's debut?), and the clangorous self-opening doors of Jupiter's temple.

As to oyster-gulping, world champion polyphagist Sonya Thomas managed 552 at one of her contest-winning ingestions; she also holds the records for speedy

consumptions of bratwursts, fruitcakes, and hot dogs – website details abound.

Although he eventually swore off them, supreme Stoic hypocrite Seneca for a long time swallowed several hundred oysters a day (*Letters* 78.23, 95. 26, 108. 15; cf. Emily Wilson, *The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca*, 2014, p54.)

His ostreophagy is suitably, if accidentally, commemorated by the annual mollusc-eating festival held at Seneca, Oregon. More appealing than the various American testicle-eating competitions, albeit they are eased down by being battered and fried – balls to that.

Greek athletes chomped on bull's gonads for strength, Romans for courage – cue Sex Pistols, *Never Mind The Bollocks...* Pliny (*NH*, bk32 ch21 paras59-65) catalogues their stunning medicinal properties, e.g. curing colds, relieving abscesses, boils, breast and tonsil problems, good for women's skin, likewise chillblains – we had to make do with Zambuk...

Pliny also notes connoisseurs who could distinguish a superior bivalve by its distinctive purple line, dubbing these 'beautiful eye-browed'. Juvenal (*Satires* 4, vv139-42) describes Domitian's courtier Montanus, equally famous for his paunch (cf. King Farouk, dubbed 'a stomach with a head') and ability to tell by one bite whether an oyster came from Circeii, the Lucrine Lake or Richborough.

The pearl potential of British oysters was supposedly Caesar's motive for his invasion, still luring Romans there a century later, says Tacitus (*Agricola*, ch12 para6), adding a mordant joke on Roman greed along the lines of Pearls Before Swine.

Oysters played a grimly lethal role in the lynching by a posse of monks (AD 415, Alexandria) of pagan mathematician-philosopher Hypatia (also inventor of the sanitary towel). Gibbon (*DFRE*, ch47) memorably distilled the contemporary accounts: "Torn from her chariot, stripped naked, her flesh scraped from her bones with sharp oyster shells, her quivering limbs delivered to the flames."

"He was a bold man that first ate an oyster" – Jonathan Swift, *Polite Conversations* (1738), Dialogue 2, albeit virtually plagiarising Thomas Fuller (*Worthies of England*, 1662), who attributes the aphorism to James I.



## STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN and THEO PAIJMANS round up the weirdest news items from across Europe...

### BUSY TIMES FOR GERMAN GHOST HUNTER

According to a recent report in the *Berliner Kurier* newspaper, most Germans believe in paranormal phenomena. About 73 per cent admit that they have had a supernatural experience at least once in their life; 16 per cent of those have seen a ghost once; and 12 per cent are convinced that they have been visited by a spook. Enter Walter von Lucadou, who has run “the only paranormal helpdesk” in Germany for more than 30 years. His phone never stops ringing, he says: “I get about 3,000 applications yearly.” Anxious Germans relate experiences ranging from voices emanating from their kettles to shadowy figures passing through walls and hair-raising encounters with the dead. Von Lucadou believes these ghostly encounters serve a distinct purpose: “Ghosts are a construct used by people to describe experiences that they cannot comprehend,” he sagely observes. And those who see ghosts are not mad at all, he emphatically states: “A woman reported that her dead husband suddenly stood in their living room. She asked if she was mad.” But this is not the case, since according to Von Lucadou, 80 per cent of married people who have lost a partner report such an experience. “It’s quite understandable. Our brains have a tendency to compensate for what is missing.” But there are two cases, Von Lucadou recently confessed to the *Berlin Kurier*, that frightened even him: “Two young girls jumped from a window out of pure fear, after having seen a ghost. Unfortunately, it was a high-rise. Another man sat in his apartment with an axe, because he was afraid that a ghost or demon would get him.” *Berliner Kurier*, 24 Feb 2019.



ABOVE: The abandoned house in Dilbeek, Belgium. BELOW: Overworked German ghost hunter, Walter von Lucadou.

### HORDES HUNT HAUNTED HOUSE’S HIDDEN HOARD

When Belgian police searched for the corpse of missing 41-year-old Mohamed Harrouchy in a villa in the village of Dilbeek, Belgium, in February this year, it was just the latest in a string of reports in which the abandoned and apparently unlucky house has featured. Dilbeek authorities had been concerned about the empty villa since November 2018, when it was the subject of multiple burglaries. The house was abandoned after a Flemish orthopaedic surgeon who lived there was the victim of a violent burglary and fled the villa out of fear of being attacked again. Since his departure, imaginations have run riot. “We have already heard that the house is haunted,” a retired couple told Belgian newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*. But that didn’t deter intruders: in the same month, dozens of youthful burglars were arrested – as many as 50 in one night. “It’s a strange story,” Major Willy Segers confessed. “A month ago, a few youths broke into the house. They were caught having taken about 850 euros and were arrested. We suspect that around that time the story



was hatched that there was a lot more money to be found in the house. It has become a kind of a legend, especially on social media.” Since the story erupted, scores of youths have tried to break into the house every day, in search of the fabled hoard hidden in its walls. They even arrived by cab, prompting the police to conduct a cat-and-mouse game. That month, more than 80 youngsters were arrested, as many as 50 in one night. The doctor, meanwhile, lamented that the situation had become “untenable”. He has since removed all his possessions from the premises and has decided to tear the place down: “The house is empty and there is not a penny to be found there: it’s an urban

legend that has reached unimaginable proportions. It’s incomprehensible that young people come here because they believe in this fable.” Reporting the incidents, Belgian media described the house variously as an “Ali Baba cave”, “a place of pilgrimage” and even “a bewitched house”. The house’s uncanny reputation, says the mayor, has taken on a life of its own since it was picked up on social media. The exact nature of the supposed haunting, though, was not further specified in news reports. *7sur7, vrt.be*, 30 Nov; *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 30 Nov, 1 Dec 2018, 12 Feb 2019.

### GARDA GRAIL

In case you were wondering, the Holy Grail is hidden in Desenzano, on the banks of Lake Garda, Italy. The Cathars hid it beneath what is now a popular pub in the Cathedral Square between Via Annunciata and Vicolo Pietro Signori. According to local historian Armando Bellelli, newspaper coverage of the idea has meant that what “launched a few years ago as a fairly extreme hypothesis has become mainstream”. *Brescia Oggi*, 7 Oct 2018.





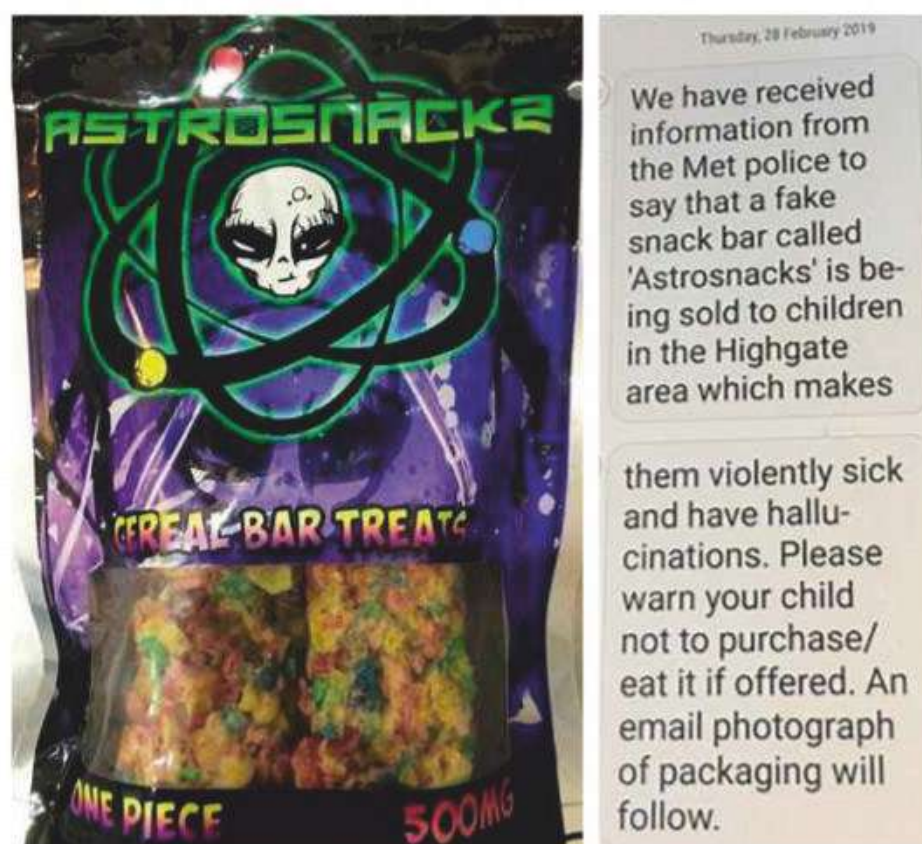
# SCHOOLYARD SCARELORE

Parents and teachers fall prey to fake warnings: the latest moral panic is the result

## MOMO CHALLENGE

For veteran forteans, Momo is short for the legendary Missouri Monster, a hairy manimal often seen in the early 1970s [FT10:11, 40:45]. Today the word 'Momo' more usually refers to an alleged cyberbullying game called "Momo challenge": the story goes that children are contacted on social messaging platforms such as WhatsApp by an account claiming to be Momo, a ghoulish icon of a woman with bulging eyes. A US source described it as "a scary ghost image that reportedly pops up in the middle of children's videos". The "challenge" was also rumoured to hack into content including Peppa Pig and Fortnite videos on Kids YouTube. The image of Momo is actually a photo of a sculpture by Japanese special effects company Link Factory. According to pop-culture website Know Your Meme, it first gained attention in 2016.

Children were supposedly encouraged to save the character as a contact and then urged to carry out dangerous "challenges" involving self-harm (or even suicide), as well as being ordered not to tell other members of their family. Other 'dares' included swallowing paracetamol tablets and turning the gas oven on after their parents were asleep. It made threats if they refused. Many British newspapers and the BBC website carried the story uncritically, prompted by safeguarding warnings on 24 February from a police officer in Craigavon, Northern Ireland, and from children's charities, and causing a full-blown moral panic. However, charities subsequently said there had been no reports of anybody receiving messages or harming themselves as a result. Several articles claimed the Momo challenge had been 'linked' to the deaths of 130 teenagers in Russia, a 12-year-old girl in Argentina, and a boy aged nine in Brazil, but these reports have not been corroborated by the



relevant authorities. *Metro*, 22 Feb; *BBC News*, *D.Mirror*, 28 Feb; WFSB (Meredith Corporation). *wfsb.com*, *Guardian*, *Times*, 1 Mar; *Middlesbrough Gazette*, 2 Mar 2019.

## ASTROSNACKS

Back in 1992, Paul Sieveking reported on the rumour of transfer tattoos laced with LSD being passed to children outside schools across Britain [FT63:26-27]; the same unfounded panic had spread across Canada and the USA in 1986 and 1987. In fact, the acid transfer legend was already well established by 1981, when it was described by the folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand.

Similar scarelore raised its head in February this year, when the following email was sent to

parents of 300 pupils at a school in Highgate, north London: "We have received information from the Met police to say that a fake snack bar called 'Astrosnacks' is being sold to children in the Highgate area which makes them violently sick and have hallucinations. Please warn your child not to purchase/eat it if offered." Information was also posted on the school's website but was removed several days later. A similar warning was received by St Albans primary school in Holborn, central London; in a letter to families, interim head teacher Rebecca Harris stoked the unease by saying Astrosnacks were linked to "extremely violent bouts of sickness and severe hallucinations". The product is believed to have been first

flagged up by members of a private Whatsapp group before being brought to the attention of the Metropolitan Police. *Islington Now* discovered an image of a cannabis-infused food shared on Instagram under the hashtag #LondonEdibles with the 'astrosnacks' logo. Beneath the logo was a warning that the bar contains "150mg THC, 2 servings per pack."

The scare turned into a London-wide issue after posts made on a public Facebook group, containing over 2,000 members, were followed up by the *Evening Standard*. A reporter from the paper asked Public Health England (PHE) for information. PHE then referred the enquiry on to London Trading Standards (LTS), which asked all 33 local authority services across the capital whether they had been made aware of any similar cases. Google search trends show that hits for the term "Astrosnacks" spiked on 28 February, when the warning was sent out from Highgate Hill Academy, and then again on 6 March, when the *Evening Standard* first investigated the matter.

Scotland Yard said: "No crime report has been made and the allegation has not been substantiated. Police have not been able to speak directly to the parties who were apparently affected." Speaking to *Islington Now*, one parent said: "How are they being sold to children? They're snacks – children are unlikely to buy snacks from anything other than a corner shop. There only seems to be one photo in circulation and the brand doesn't appear to come up in any search in the 20-30 minutes I spent yesterday having a hunt around." A Twitter user called Axel commented: "This latest hoax demonstrates once more how difficult it is for parents and children, but also schools, to scrutinise online content and distinguish the genuine from the fake." *Islingtonnow.co.uk*, *D.Telegraph*, 14 Mar 2019.





# The afterlife of Pablo Escobar

ALAN MURDIE examines a recent post-mortem appearance by Colombia's most infamous drug lord

Claims of “a whitish figure that seems to levitate just inches from the ground”, visible in the upper floor of a derelict Colombian mansion once owned by arch-drug trafficker and narco-terrorist Pablo Escobar (1949-1993) just seconds before it was demolished forever by a controlled explosion, circulated internationally in popular newspapers and on social media in late February and early March. (‘Ghost Seen in Mansion of Drug Lord Pablo Escobar As It Was Demolished’ 27 Feb 2019, *Mysterious Universe* website).

The municipal authorities in the city of Medellín were engaged in demolishing the windowless and vandalised shell of the former mansion, uninhabited since 1988, amid a plan to redevelop the site as a memorial park to the thousands who died in drug-related slaughter in the 1980s and 1990s. What was interpreted as evidence of a ghost loose in the building took the form of a whitish speck picked up on video, spotted moving rapidly back and forth around the exposed upper floor in the minute before the charges were detonated and the structure collapsed into rubble.

Many English-language entertainment-orientated newspapers netted the footage from postings across Colombian and Latin American social media and gossip websites such as *Q’hubo Cali.com* (‘How you doing, Cali’, 24 Feb 2019). In particular, it featured in various British newspapers which like to cover stories about famous people drugging themselves as well as ghost claims derived solely from blurry photographs (*Sun*, *Mirror*, *Star*, *Mail* etc). Here these two themes combined in one story, with the resultant exposure brought to my attention with a posting of the footage on the ‘Mysterious Universe’ website, hosted from the USA. Commenting on the story was writer Paul Seaburn who repeated suggestions from individuals variously postulating the animated dot was the spirit of the psychopathic Escobar, dead for more than a quarter of a century, one of his victims, “someone who was buried there” or even an expression of “negative energy”. Seaburn is a writer for television who “has co-authored numerous collections of trivia, puzzles and humor” and “likes to add a bit of humor to each Mysterious Universe post he crafts”. According to him, “the mysterious doesn’t



LEFT: Pablo Escobar's Medellín mansion is demolished. BELOW LEFT: Did the dead drug lord appear in phantom form just before the demolition? OPPOSITE PAGE: Pablo Escobar – still a national obsession.

for amusement and commercial advertising. With these the coverage of supposed anomalous phenomena rarely rises above the level of TV programmes pitched at children. Unfortunately, when it comes to their content being picked up and reproduced in the Western media, this essential characteristic is often lost in translation. All too often what are unsubtle, tongue-in-cheek and jokey stories or even entirely fabricated tales are uncritically repeated by the Anglo-Saxon press. The derived English-language sources are then drawn upon by anomaly researchers based in North America and Europe who accept these translated renditions as serious and credible reports and go on to solemnly cite them in their own research.

Even the most competent scholars have fallen victim to this. A prime example I was pleased to expose in 2001 was an alleged entity encounter in Colombia in 1976 involving a farmer, Annibal Quintero, who underwent a group sexual encounter with hairy female extraterrestrials after they kidnapped him aboard their flying saucer on the night of a violent thunderstorm which had earlier sent him to bed with a migraine headache.

This report became a favourite of the scholarly Hilary Evans who, it must be stressed, viewed this not as evidence of an entity encounter but

potentially as evidence of the capacity for electromagnetism to stimulate hallucinations in the human brain, with him duly declaring that “EM is one of the factors which can precipitate an altered state of consciousness”. (See Hilary Evans in *Alternate States of Consciousness* (1989); *Journal of the SPR*, vol.65, Jan 2001.) His source for the Quintero story was a contemporary translation of the claim that appeared in the serious American bulletin *UFO Report* (1977) vol.5, no.1, Nov 1977, which listed a 1976 edition of the Colombian magazine *Vea* as the original source.

Having travelled extensively around Colombia since 1996 on the track of

always have to be serious”.

It doesn't have to be baloney either, but after telling us “The image is not shaped like a human or ghost” (which presupposes Seaburn himself knows what the latter looks like) he asserted that it looks “more like a large square” and was led to ask if it was merely a piece of wind-borne cardboard blowing around inside the open building. But that wouldn't be a story, so he felt impelled to join in the fever of rhetorical speculation on Escobar's ghost asking: “Did Pablo come back for one last romp through the halls?” It is not an urgent question, but answers to it are instructive.

Like the media in the English-speaking world, Latin America suffers a surfeit of websites and magazines that exist solely



strange phenomena, I decided to look into this one. From this information I was able to make further investigation starting at the Central Library in Bogota in July 2001. The expressions of the librarians when I enquired were a picture. They explained patiently that *Vea* was a discredited defunct scandal rag that frequently ran wholly invented stories of a sensationalist nature of which even the least intelligent sectors of the Colombian public had rapidly tired. No complete run of *Vea* was held, but then the librarians scarcely considered it worth preserving. *Q'hubo Cali*, which covered the 'Escobar ghost' story, is seen as a worthy successor to this publication.

It would therefore appear that no credibility could be attached to any aspect of this racy story of sexual contact between hairy female aliens and a human being, whether as a UFO report, an 'entity encounter' or a bizarre hallucination triggered by electromagnetic influence. (A Murdie, *SPR Journal*, 2002, 66, no.868). Colombian ufologists dismissed the story entirely.

I must say Hilary Evans took this well when I relayed the news to him. This literary hoax problem is not confined to foreign-language sources but also applies to the uncritical acceptance of historical texts in English drawn from antique sources. Fortean had warning of this a long time ago. Just because an account is old is not a reason to discredit it, but the past had its share of those who wrote and published sensational claims for propaganda and entertainment purposes. (See Michael Goss, "Strange and wonderful news..." broadsides, tabloids, folklore and fortean phenomena', *Fortean Studies* (1994) vol.1, pp.182-197, edited by Steve Moore). A good example is the oft-repeated claims of the spectral re-enactment of the battle of Edgehill at Christmas 1643, supposedly endorsed by a Royalist Commission soon after the re-enactment. It has been uncritically and endlessly recycled in ghost books for many years. There are original 17<sup>th</sup> century pamphlets and sources mentioning it, but the whole tale appears to be an invention.

Returning to our own era, to pierce the veil of nonsense over the Medellin mansion footage, one simply has to check the more cerebral parts of Colombian media to extract alternative views on the topic. Most correspondents were wholly unconvinced by the claims and discussion. For example, the leading Colombian daily *El Tiempo* (28 Feb 2019) undertook analysis of the footage, canvassing the views of psychologists and film specialists who variously postulated a misinterpretation of a water droplet, the possibility of tampering with the image and the subjective tendency



## Was it merely a piece of wind-borne cardboard blowing around inside the open building?

to create apparitions in the mind's eye through autosuggestion. Diego Leon, a neurologist and social psychologist quoted by *El Tiempo*, considered the power of social media to project and spread such misperceptions into wider society. His message is a familiar one, basically citing how human beings easily fall for the version of reality presented on camera when encouraged by social pressure, their perceptions manipulated by what other people are claiming to see.

Predictably, these more sober and clear-headed comments have not received a fraction of the attention devoted to the original claim. As one Colombian put it to me concerning the Medellin clip: "At that distance, you would have to be on drugs to consider that to be Escobar's ghost", or anything at all.

I agree. It is not that Colombians don't believe in ghosts; widespread beliefs in spirit intervention and the power of *brujeria* or witchcraft and magic can make the social atmosphere more akin to that of Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as described in Keith Thomas's *Religion and Decline of Magic* (1970). Rather many Colombians also feel that the tone of such stories, involving the fetishisation of Escobar and the violence that Colombia and neighbouring nations suffered in recent decades, is offensive. Anyone who spent any time in the country during the period concerned will understand why many Colombians don't find this kind of stuff amusing. Western ignorance and indifference to the huge toll of Latin

American victims, the real price of drug consumption by "the Great White nostril to the North" and the open toleration and even encouragement of cocaine usage in fashionable sectors of pop culture in Britain and the USA, remain a lasting cause of sadness and resentment to many in Colombia who survived a generation of guerrilla conflict, terrorism, bombing, kidnapping and murder.

On a visit in October 1999 I travelled to the Caribbean shores of the beautiful National Park at Tayrona in the north of the country and the ancient sacred area of Playa Crystal. Seldom have I seen a tropical beach and coral reef so deserted of people, though not on account of ghosts. A local indigenous man named Yemi who acted as guide and was keen to share local supernatural experiences told me how much of the area was prone to sightings of spectral lights and ghostly visits by an ancient shaman who was buried near the beach. But few now were around to see them, owing to drug-related violence and the activities of marijuana smugglers, which had depopulated the area from the mid-1980s. These ghost stories were not that old folkloric favourite explanation of coastal ghosts as "stories spread by smugglers". The traffickers had not tried to scare the people off with supernatural ruses; they had simply killed them when they got in their way. Yemi spoke with a remarkable stoic detachment of all of this, including how 11 members of his own family had been killed in attempts by narco-traffickers to drive them off their land. (These victims merited no mention in the books of the late celebrity marijuana trafficker Howard 'Mr Nice Guy' Marks.)

Yemi considered that the violence had been one of the triggers for the sightings of anomalous lights. A small glowing sphere had been seen sweeping slowly down from the sky and skimming the waves over the coral reef in the bay. A larger ball of light or glow seemed to follow the shoreline and was interpreted as the returning spirit of an indigenous chieftain from pre-Conquest times, whilst others were *guachas* or spirit lights appearing as omens before killings. His own experiences included on one night seeing an animated ball of light, described by him as being like a small electric torch or lantern, which swooped low over him, hovering above where he lay terrified in his hammock. These local experiences were of a very different calibre to the ambiguous photographic images of alleged ghosts in the mass media today.

More widely, stories such as the spurious Medellin mansion 'ghost' and the labelling of the more credible sightings in Tayrona as a ghostly chieftain illustrate the ubiquitous inclination to attach the name





# GHOSTWATCH

of some famous or infamous individual to alleged ghostly phenomena.

Ascribing manifestations to a recognised deceased personality who no longer has any capacity to cause physical harm can successfully reduce tension and unease about the unknown. British ghostlore is a celebrity book of claimed appearances, examples of how villains (and sometimes heroes) of yesteryear return to haunt the collective psyche of communities. Such labelling provides a means of bringing the mysterious within the orbit of the familiar and the material. Ghostly kings, queens, major and petty tyrants, notorious highwaymen, wicked aristocrats and assorted folk characters are used to fill explanatory vacuums and answer the uncertainties about what lies behind such phenomena. Such labels are applied regardless of any logic or actual evidence. Alternatively, a sense of familiarity can be encouraged by awarding the manifestation a spurious or absurd nickname such as 'Old George' or 'Mrs It'. To trivialise anomalous phenomena is a coping strategy for those troubled by the uncanny.

This tendency is cross-cultural, emerging even under the most materialistic regimes. Such a process was noted in Iron Curtain countries by Dennis Bardens (1911-2004), a seasoned scrutiniser of media in the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War. After authoring a book on Soviet censorship in 1952 (*The Press in Chains*) and ever sensitive to the human evil and villainy that can lurk behind elaborate ideological façades, Bardens noted ghost stories which circulated after the execution of Stalin's merciless secret police Lavrentiy Beria in 1953. According to various ghost rumours that spread in Moscow after Stalin's death, it was averred Beria was returning as a ghost. In addition to overseeing the mass arrests and liquidation of thousands of Soviet citizens, it was alleged Beria had arrested dozens of women under spurious pretexts to satisfy his own sadistic lust. These victims had



ABOVE: Stalin's notorious secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria, with the dictator's daughter Svetlana.

been snatched from off the streets and delivered to his private apartments to be raped and abused before being shot, duly listed among the hundreds of thousands who perished in the Stalinist Great Terror. Beria was reputedly returning in spectral form, along with some of his victims.

After Beria was in turn executed for his crimes under Khrushchev, his former home, set in a large secure compound, was transformed into the Tunisian Embassy. Part of this accommodated the Tunisian Ambassador, Ahmed Mestiri, and his wife and two children. The Ambassador's wife soon complained of phantom noises including "shrieks, moaning and sobbing, and peals of laughter" from the direction of the cellar. One night she awoke to see a woman in a white robe, who warned her not to stay under the roof if she valued the life of her husband and children.

Her husband, a graduate of the Sorbonne, tried to convince his wife she was hallucinating, but two tragedies

occurred, encouraging the idea the apartment was cursed. The two-year-old son of a diplomat fell from a sixth story window in February 1961 and a few weeks later a Consul was killed when, driving back from an official reception, his car skidded and fell into the Moscow River. These encouraged the Mestiris to quit the house and return to Tunis.

After their departure, a secret system of cells and chambers was found in the cellar. To end the haunting, an Islamic ritual of exorcism was conducted. Since the end of communism, the stories have grown and been embroidered, rumours averring Beria haunts the property. ('Woman in white haunts the house that Beria left' *Sunday Times*, 26 Feb 1964; Dennis Bardens *Ghosts and Hauntings*, 1965).

At such a point the psychical researcher should pass the research baton to the social scientist, anomalous psychologist or folklorist, for we are often dealing with beliefs rather than anything capable of experiment and more forensic examination. Yet this is not to reject accounts as purely anecdotal. Once colourful folklore and local traditional window-dressing are stripped away, what has impressed me about many of the reports of ghostly activity from Colombia and worldwide are the essential similarities that may be found. Some of these similarities are so striking that they may be considered probative, to a degree that would be admissible and significant as evidence in any other context. For example, the first-hand descriptions of strange lights on the Colombian coast closely match the descriptions of the 'earthlight phenomena'. The parallels between reports of *duendes* (elves) and poltergeist activity are an even clearer example. But that is a topic for another time.



ABOVE: The Beria house in Moscow, which came to enjoy a reputation as cursed and haunted.



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### KARL SHUKER gets quite a buzz from a pair of exciting discoveries (plus one no-show)

#### BUZZED OFF, BUZZED BACK

Ever since English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace first brought it to scientific attention in 1859 after collecting a huge female specimen on the island of Bacan in the North Moluccas, Pluto's giant bee *Megachile pluto*, aka the king bee, has been something of an enigma, and a highly elusive one at that. For despite being the world's biggest bee species, females measuring up to almost 2in (5cm) long (males are smaller), this gargantuan Indonesian insect is equally famous for remaining concealed from scientific view for a very long time, having been dismissed as extinct before reappearing. Its most extensively documented return to the scientific spotlight occurred in 1981, when



several specimens (including the first documented males) were recorded on the Moluccan islands of Halmahera, Tidore, and subsequently Bacan once more.

Those were the first ones to be confirmed for over a century – but it had not been sighted since then, and entomologists began to fear the worst. Happily, however, in January

2019 an adult female was not only observed but also (for the first time) photographed and videoed alive, inside a termite mound being used as a bee's nest on the island of Ternate, close to Halmahera and Tidore. It was recorded by wildlife photographer Clay Bolt, who in the company of American Museum of Natural History entomologist Dr Eli Wyman and two other colleagues had visited Ternate specifically to seek this near-legendary creature, whose females are approximately four times as large as those of the familiar European honeybee *Apis mellifera*. Happily, the potency of their sting is not in proportion to their size! [www.globalwildlife.org/2019/02/21/rediscovering-wallaces-giant-bee/](http://www.globalwildlife.org/2019/02/21/rediscovering-wallaces-giant-bee/); [www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-47311186](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-47311186) 22 Feb 2019.



#### MISSING IN MADAGASCAR?

The possible survival of some of Madagascar's giant lemurs, officially deemed to have become extinct several centuries ago at the very least, has always fascinated me, ever since as a teenager back in the early 1970s I first read the famous chapter devoted to this mini-continent's mystery beasts in Dr Bernard Heuvelmans's classic cryptozoology book *On the Track of Unknown Animals*. The most celebrated Madagascan cryptids that may be late-surviving giant lemurs include the tratratrata, kidoky, tokandia, habéby, mangarsahoc, kalanoro, and kotoko (see my book *Mirabilis* for extensive coverage).

On 5 November 2018, however, the American TV documentary channel

Animal Planet posted on YouTube a video in which wildlife adventurer Forrest Galante was seeking a mystery lemur that I had never seen documented before. The locals describe it as a giant red lemur, and refer to it as the kisuala, and the video wonders whether it is a surviving species of *Pachylemur* – a two-species genus of extinct giant lemur that may have survived until as recently as 500 years ago. They were most closely related to the still-living ruffed lemurs, one of which, *Varecia rubra*, is indeed red. I don't think I'm including a spoiler for viewers about to watch the video by saying that Forrest's search for the kisuala was unsuccessful – otherwise it would have made major headlines worldwide. However, it is always exciting to publicise a cryptid not previously documented in the cryptozoological literature, and we can but hope that future searches for this intriguing animal will be made. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FW-Fhcl8D8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FW-Fhcl8D8) 5 Nov 2018.

#### FORREST FINDS HER ON FERNANDINA

Speaking of Forrest Galante making major headlines worldwide: it seems an unwritten maxim of wildlife programmes seeking extinct or mysterious animals that they must never, ever find any. However, Forrest stands charged with not so much breaking as entirely demolishing that law. While filming another documentary for Animal Planet, he recently rediscovered a very sizeable creature deemed extinct for over a century. For several decades there have been unconfirmed sightings of giant tortoises on the remote volcanic

Galapagos island of Fernandina as well as scat samples found there in 1964 and 2013, but no confirmed specimens. Then on 17 February 2019, after two days of filming as part of an exploratory expedition, Forrest and the team discovered a single living adult female individual. Following analysis of the expedition's photos and video footage by an international team of tortoise experts from Turtle Conservancy, it would appear to be a specimen of the Fernandina giant tortoise *Chelonoidis phantasticus* – previously known only from a single male specimen found dead on the island in April 1906. As food for her on Fernandina was sparse and she was already underweight, she was captured and relocated to Fausto Llerena Tortoise Breeding Center, a national park facility in Isla Santa Cruz, where she can be cared for and monitored. Meanwhile, searches are planned for any male specimens. [www.thewrap.com/extinct-or-alive-fernandina-tortoise-forrest-galante-animal-planet/](http://www.thewrap.com/extinct-or-alive-fernandina-tortoise-forrest-galante-animal-planet/) 20 Feb; [www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/giant-tortoise-believed-extinct-for-100-years-found-in-galapagos?fbclid=IwAROCnzJdB8Bo5T1hOheyEb9A6YdAUnIEAJDTBo\\_QEH7hih9Tf3VUQky1OCs](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/giant-tortoise-believed-extinct-for-100-years-found-in-galapagos?fbclid=IwAROCnzJdB8Bo5T1hOheyEb9A6YdAUnIEAJDTBo_QEH7hih9Tf3VUQky1OCs) 20 Feb 2019.







# ...OUT OF WATER | A dead humpback whale turns up in the Amazon rainforest, while a mystery sunfish in California proves to be an out-of-place hoodwinker!



BICHO\_DAGUA / INSTAGRAM

ABOVE: The humpback whale carcass found on Marajó island. BELOW: Holy Mola! Santa Barbara's mystery sunfish is discovered.

## DEAD WHALE MYSTERY

On 22 February, the body of a humpback whale was found dead on the edge of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil. The 26ft (8m)-long carcass, estimated to weigh 10 tons, was found under a circle of vultures. It was on the forest floor of Marajó island, roughly 50ft (15m) from the ocean shore and close to the Amazon river mouth. Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) normally frequent the Amazon Basin in wintertime, when salt water crawls up the freshwater rivers, and that's precisely what makes this discovery so baffling. Not only was the whale found remarkably far from shore, it was also found in the exact opposite season you'd expect to see humpbacks in this region. During the Amazonian summer, when freshwater rivers flood, local humpback whales should have already travelled over 4,000 miles (6,000km) south, to their feeding grounds in Antarctica's krill-filled summer oceans.

There is one clue that may help explain things. Judging by the size of the carcass, the whale is probably a calf, no more than a year old and half the size of

## This is not the first time a whale has been found in the rainforest

an adult. Biologists suspect that the juvenile somehow lost its mother during migration, and was dumped by high waves onto the shore, ultimately becoming entangled in the mangroves, unable to escape. Another theory is that the calf died from ingesting plastic waste and its dead body was washed ashore by stormy seas. An autopsy was expected to determine cause of death.

This is not the first time a whale has been found in the Amazon rainforest. In 2007, a minke whale measuring more than 18ft (5m) was found stranded on a sandbar off the Amazon near the city of Santarem, about 1,000 miles (1,600km) from the Atlantic. It eventually managed to free itself and swim to safety.

Marine mammals can become stranded for a variety

of reasons, from environmental factors, such as rough weather, to sickness. One of the most interesting theories about whale strandings argues that solar storms, bright bursts of electromagnetic energy from the Sun, could be messing with the animals' internal compasses. Naval sonar from ships is also commonly cited as a suspect in cetacean strandings. Recent research has shown how sonar can cause some whale species to become distressed, causing them to change their diving patterns. This can result in a build-up of nitrogen bubbles in

their blood, a condition known as decompression sickness or the bends. [sciencealert.com](http://sciencealert.com), [newsweek.com](http://newsweek.com), [iflscience.com](http://iflscience.com), 25 Feb 2019.

## ERRANT SUNFISH

A 7ft (2.1m) sea creature, washed ashore in March at the Coal Oil Point Reserve in Santa Barbara, California, was identified as a rare hoodwinker sunfish (*Mola tecta*), previously thought to live only in the southern hemisphere. The discovery of the species was announced in 2017 to much fanfare. Found off New Zealand in 2014, it was the first new sunfish to be discovered in 130 years – quite a feat considering how large they are. They can grow up to 9.8ft (3m) in length. It was named for its impressive stealth – *tectus* being the Latin word for 'hidden'.

In fact, its presence in Northern Hemisphere waters is not unprecedented. A sunfish collected in 1889 in the Dutch islands and preserved at the Naturalis Biodiversity Centre was determined in 2017 not to be an example of the ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*) as originally thought. Scientists reassessed the fish after the discovery of *M. tecta* was publicised, and found that it too was a hoodwinker. So that's two discovered in the Northern Hemisphere over 130 years. [BBC News](http://BBC News), [euronews.com](http://euronews.com), 2 Mar; [sciencealert.com](http://sciencealert.com), 4 Mar 2019.



TOM TURNER / NATURALIST / CREATIVE COMMONS





## MEDICAL BAG

Our regular round-up of strange stories from the doctor's surgery: this month, an onion-sized baby, a vampire mum, and the dangers of laughing...

### LUNG-SHAPED BLOOD CLOT

A 36-year-old man in California coughed up a lung-shaped blood clot. He was being treated for a serious heart condition: his heart muscle couldn't pump enough blood to meet the body's normal demands. He was put on a pacemaker and prescribed a blood-thinner, which increased the risk of bleeding, including coughing up blood. He had several coughing episodes in which he expelled small amounts of blood. Then, during an "extreme bout of coughing," he spat out an "intact cast" of his right bronchial tree.

"We were astonished," said Dr Georg Wieselthaler, a heart and lung surgeon at the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center. "It's a curiosity you can't imagine – I mean, this is very, very, very rare." It's less rare for patients to cough up bronchial "casts" made of other substances, such as lymph or mucus; but blood is less sticky and sturdy, meaning that a cast made of blood is less likely to hold together when coughed up. In this case, the patient had an infection that increased levels of a protein called fibrinogen, which helps blood clots form; and higher levels of fibrinogen could have helped the man's large clot to stay intact. Even though the man had no further episodes of coughing up blood, he sadly died a week later from complications of heart failure. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 29 Nov; *Live Science*, *Metro*, 7 Dec 2018.

### MOTHER FROM HELL

A mother who drained almost a pint of blood from her son's veins as often as once a week for five years has been jailed for four years. The 36-year-old trained nurse performed 110 drains on the boy, from the age of one to six, and told doctors his low blood count was caused by a rare bone marrow disease. They alerted police and she was arrested, a court in Herning, Denmark, heard. The fact that she suffers from Munchausen



ABOVE: The lung-shaped blood clot – an intact cast of the right bronchial tree – coughed up by a 36-year-old man in California.

syndrome by proxy, where a parent makes up or causes their child's illness, doesn't absolve her from responsibility. *Metro*, 8 Feb 2019.

### HEARTRENDING

A man in his 20s spent more than £22,000 trying to identify the cause of his fevers and lung inflammation, and was treated for sepsis and even leucæmia before doctors in Nanning, south China, found and removed a toothpick from inside the right atrium of his heart. The man later admitted the habit of putting a toothpick in his glass when drinking with friends to keep track of which one is his. He is thought to have swallowed one four years earlier. *D.Mail*, 2 Feb 2019.

### DON'T LAUGH

Edward Davies had to be prevented from laughing or crying, which could have killed him. Strong emotion triggered violent sickness, which could have made the one-year-old choke on his own vomit. His parents had to stop him giggling whenever he broke into a smile. He suffered from the genetic disease Cornelia de Lange syndrome (CDLS), which affects

just 400 people in the UK. Valves in his lungs didn't work, triggering sickness if he laughed, cried or lay on his back. His mother – Rachel Davies, 31, from Malvern, Worcestershire – said: "We both have to watch him all the time." CDLS sufferers rarely live into adulthood. *Sun*, *Metro*, 15 Jan 2007.

- Teacher Carolyn Gibbons, 23, of Hythe, Hampshire, was warned she could die if she laughed out loud, because her brain was too big for her head. She endured daily seizures, blurred vision and crippling migraines because of a rare condition called Arnold Chiari Malformation. Any sudden movement made her feel as if her head was "about to pop". If the pressure became too great, her brain could herniate into her spinal column, which could be fatal. At the time of the report, she was on a cocktail of 50 pills and faced further surgery. *D.Mirror*, 30 Nov 2011.

- Jessica Southall, 21, from Nottingham, "falls asleep" if she experiences strong emotions, such as laughter, anger or surprise. Her condition – narcolepsy with cataplexy –

means her muscles relax totally when it kicks in. She began to experience extreme exhaustion at the age of 15; she found herself falling asleep in lessons, on the bus to school and even in the middle of conversations. She suffered debilitating "sleep attacks" while in labour with her daughter Briella in 2016. She always has to sit down if she wants to watch comedy on television. "One minute I'll be there in stitches laughing my head off, not able to stop... The next moment my head is on my chest or I'm lying on the floor. I'm fully awake. I can hear everything but I can't talk and I can't move. I can't respond or snap out of it until the emotion stops. To any other person it looks like I've fallen asleep. It happens when I orgasm too. When my partner and I were first dating it was near enough every time." *Daily Star Sunday*, 17 Sept 2017.

- From the age of 10, Claris Diaz began suffering 'mini-strokes' whenever she giggled. At 26, the American was diagnosed with Moyamoya disease. Aged 32 at the time of the report, she was researching strokes at Cardiff University. (Moyamoya



# MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

## 236: BLUE BLOOD



### The myth

The blood in your veins is blue. It becomes red on exposure to oxygen – such as when you cut your finger.

### The “truth”

That’s what I was taught when I was at school, and it’s quite surprising to discover how many people still believe it. In fact, all human blood is always red – or rather, it’s always red to the human eye. It contains haemoglobin, a protein that transports oxygen, and haemoglobin is red. Blood’s colour does indeed change according to the amount of oxygen it contains, but only between dark red and bright red. If you’re a blood donor, you’ll know your blood isn’t blue, because you’ll have seen it, red as anything, leaving your body and entering a sealed bag; according to the myth it ought to be blue at that stage, because it hasn’t been touched by air. Veins aren’t blue either, though the fact that they often appear to be is perhaps the basis of this old belief. Red light has a long wavelength, and blue a short wavelength. That means that the red components of daylight penetrate into the skin and are absorbed better than the blue, most of which bounces off (if you’ll excuse the technical term). The light that then enters the watching eye is therefore disproportionately blue, making the veins appear blue to us.

### Sources

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### Disclaimer

Wavelengths is a wobbly subject, so if you can correct a few of our errors, please let your light shine on the letters page.

### Mythchaser

It seems to be universally accepted that “blue blood”, meaning aristocratic, refers to the posh having fair skins – either through racial purity or because they didn’t toil in the sun – which made their “blue” veins more visible than those of the peasantry. That sounds like a dictionary definition of folk etymology to us: do you know of a better explanation?



disease is a rare, progressive cerebrovascular disorder caused by blocked arteries at the base of the brain in an area called the basal ganglia. Moyamoya means “puff of smoke” in Japanese and describes the look of the tangle of tiny vessels formed to compensate for the blockage.)  
*Sun, 6 Feb 2015.*

### DEAF TO HER BOYFRIEND

A woman surnamed Chen, from the Chinese coastal city of Xiamen, was suffering from nausea and ringing in her ears, but hoped a good night’s sleep would solve the problem, and went to bed with her boyfriend. However, when she awoke she was unable to hear his voice, and took herself off to the city’s Qianpu Hospital, where she was seen by Dr Lin Xiaoqing, an ear, nose and throat specialist. “[Ms Chen] was able to hear me when I spoke to her,” said Dr Xiaoqing, “but when a young male patient walked in, she couldn’t hear him at all.” She was diagnosed with low-frequency hearing loss, or reverse-slope hearing loss (RSL) – the opposite of the far more common form of hearing loss. Ms Chen had been working late recently, putting her body under a lot of stress and not getting enough sleep. Dr Xiaoqing said it was important to treat symptoms quickly. She expected Ms Chen to make a full recovery.

The condition is believed to affect only one in nearly 13,000 patients with deafness issues. It is difficult to recognise, diagnose, and treat as most health care professionals will

be treating *high*-frequency loss or simply have never heard of it. Also, those born with the condition may not be aware that they have it (unaware, for instance, of thunder or the hum of a refrigerator), and therefore never seek help. Symptoms include difficulty understanding speech on the phone, as volume normally comes from lower frequencies.  
*dailymail.co.uk, 9 Jan 2019.*

### SMALLEST BABY BOY

A baby the size of a large onion has been born in Japan. At just 268g (9.45oz) he is the boy with the lowest birth weight to have been discharged from hospital in good health. Following five months of treatment at Keio University Hospital in Tokyo, he weighed 7lb (3.2kg) and was feeding normally. “I’m happy he had grown this big because, honestly, I wasn’t sure he could survive,” said his mother. The unnamed child was delivered by emergency caesarean section at 24 weeks and could fit into a pair of cupped hands. His skin was so thin that his ribcage was clearly visible.

According to a registry compiled by the University of Iowa, the record was previously held by a boy born in Germany in 2009 weighing 274g (9.7oz), after being born 15 weeks prematurely. The smallest ever recorded baby that has survived was a girl born in Germany in 2015 weighing 252g (8.8oz). Girls are more likely to survive pre-term birth than boys. This could be due to them having better developed lungs. *D.Telegraph, D.Mail, 28 Feb 2019.*



ABOVE: The unnamed child, delivered at 24 weeks, at Keio University Hospital.



## DODGING THE BULLET

Servicemen saved by Bibles, whistles, and cameras; these days, it's more likely to be a mobile phone

● Private John Trickett would have been shot in the heart during World War I if not for the coin he kept in his breast pocket. Instead, the bullet ricocheted up his nose and out through the back of his left ear, leaving him deaf in that ear. The dented 1889 penny was sold by Hansons Auctioneers on 22 March along with items including Trickett's British War Medal and Victory Medal. His granddaughter, Maureen Coulson, 63, from Duffield, Derbyshire, said: "Everyone in our family saw the penny and heard the story of how it saved my grandfather's life. His two brothers, Horace and Billy, both died in the First World War." She said her grandfather, who was about 19 when he was shot in 1918, was "a great big guy from a Lincolnshire farming background but as soft as a brush". *BBC News*, 14 Mar 2019.

● As he prepared to take part in the D-Day landings in June 1944, Bill Harris was given a ring by Madge, his wife. His son John, 73, said: "[My father] had been clearing houses with the rest of his regiment. He was helping lads over fences in back gardens so that they could go in through the back doors. During a lull in the fighting he decided to pause for a cigarette and as he was lighting it a sniper fired and, rather than hit him in the face or neck, the bullet hit the ring." The shot spun him round and he was left with a broken finger, but the ring had saved his life. He survived the war and was married to Madge for more than 50 years before he died in 1996 aged 76. His son has given the ring, along with his father's medals and war records, to the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum in Warwick. *Sunday Express*, 17 Dec 2017.

● Corporal Joseph Clucas from Liverpool was fighting in



TOP: Private John Trickett and the lucky dented penny recently sold at auction.  
ABOVE: Jock McGrigor holding the telescope which saved the life of his father, Lieutenant Rhoderick McGrigor, during the Battle of Jutland.

France in 1915 when he was hit by enemy fire, but the bullet bounced off a whistle he was carrying. In 1917, aged 22, he was wounded at Passchendaele and, while being stretchered to a dressing station, was killed by a shell. *D.Mail*, 1 Sept 2014.

● On 10 March 1915, Private FA Cooke of the 2nd Lincolns was charging the trenches at Nueve Chapelle when he was shot in the chest just above the heart. He life was saved by a bundle of love letters in his pocket that slowed the bullet

considerably and reduced its penetration. *Boston Standard*, 8 April 2015.

● Lieutenant Ralfe Whistler from Glasgow was drafted to Mesopotamia in April 1916 during the unsuccessful relief of Kut, Iraq. He was hit several times by gunfire, but the bullet aimed at his heart was stopped by his pocket camera. He was killed in April 1917 at Arras in France. *D.Mail*, 1 Sept 2014.

● Lieutenant Rhoderick McGrigor was serving on *HMS Malaya* during the Battle of Jutland in 1916 when a piece of flying shrapnel was deflected by his telescope, saving his life. The young officer rose through the ranks to become First Sea Lord 35 years later. In 2016 his son loaned the dented telescope to the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth for the centenary of the battle, in which 9,000 people died. *D.Telegraph*, 19 May 2016.

### BIBLES

● Naturally, if the object of salvation is the Good Book, the tale of survival has added religious heft. In 1916 Frank Viner, 21, was crouching in a trench on the Somme battlefield with three comrades when an explosion rang out above their heads and they were showered in shrapnel. When Viner came to, he found he was the only soldier in the trench left alive. He was missing his helmet and every button on his jacket had been blown away. His 1,000-page Palestine Pictorial Bible, a present from his father, was hanging out of his right breast pocket. It was filled with shrapnel that would otherwise have pierced his chest. He was taken to hospital with shell shock, but suffered no other injuries in the blast. After the war he spent a few years as a





lay preacher, travelling from parish to parish to tell his story and show his life-saving Bible. He died in 1975, aged 80. *Dorking Advertiser*, 5 Mar 2015.

- George Mills cheated death on 6 June 1917 at the Battle of Messines. After emerging from trenches he was struck by shrapnel, but it was diverted from his chest by a Bible, although the impact was sufficient to hospitalise him for four days. Sadly, his luck ran out on 24 March 1918 during Germany's final push. He died of wounds in a military hospital, aged just 24. *Sunday Mercury*, 17 July 2016.

- Leonard Knight was 17 in July 1915 when he enlisted, and his aunt, Minnie Yates, gave him a Bible. It was in his breast pocket when it saved his life. A German bullet penetrated the hardback cover, but was halted about 50 pages from the end (probably in the First Epistle to Timothy). His family lost touch with him after the war, but they believe he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and lived into his 70s. His Bible, with the bullet still embedded in it, has been passed down in his family, and is now cared for by Paula Ryan, 60, great granddaughter of Minnie Yates. *D.Express*, 17 Jan 2017.

- In 1917, Private Wilfrid Bush was saved on the Ypres battlefield in Belgium when two bullets destined for his chest were stopped by a Bible



**ABOVE LEFT:** Frank Viner's Palestine Pictorial Bible, its pages ripped apart by the shrapnel that would otherwise have killed him. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Frank with the Bible. **BELOW LEFT:** The pocket camera which stopped several bullets aimed at Ralfe Whistler's heart. **BELOW:** Lisa Bridgett was injured in the bomb attack on an Ariana Grande concert, but her phone may have saved her life.

in his breast pocket. He was knocked off his feet and nearly drowned in a shell hole before being dragged to safety. His comrades feared he had been mortally wounded, but instead found a bullet lodged in his Bible. Another had ricocheted off it and passed through his collarbone. He died in 1960 aged 76. *D.Mail*, 1 Sept 2014.

## PHONES

- A 43-year-old Australian man found an intruder on his property in Nimbin, New South Wales armed with a bow and arrow. As he tried to photograph the intruder with his smart phone, the latter fired an arrow at him. The arrow pierced his phone, knocking it back into his face. He suffered a small cut but was otherwise unhurt.



The armed man, 39, was later arrested at the scene. The men were known to each other, police said. *BBC News*, 14 Mar; *D.Telegraph*, 15 Mar 2019.

- Daniel Kenny, 25, was blasted at point-blank range with a sawn-off shotgun outside his home in Widnes, Cheshire. He was rushed to hospital where surgeons said the mobile phone in his pocket had saved him by absorbing most of the shot. *Sun*, 22 May 2015.

- Han Peng, 47, was shot at point-blank range at a karaoke bar in Hsinchu, Taiwan, and was rushed to hospital. If his smart phone had not stopped the bullet, he would probably have died instead of suffering minor injuries. *MX News (Sydney)*, 30 July 2014.



- Lisa Bridgett was speaking into her iPhone after the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester on 22 May 2017 when a suicide bomber detonated an IED packed with nuts and bolts to act as shrapnel, killing 22 people and injuring around 800. The explosion sent a steel nut towards Mrs Bridgett's head. She lost her middle finger but the impact was reduced as the nut hit her phone before passing through her cheek into her nose. Mrs Bridgett, 45, a boatyard manager from Pwllheli in North Wales, also sustained a fractured ankle and a large wound on her thigh.

Her husband said she was "very lucky to be alive". He believed the smashed phone had slowed down the nut, and diverted its trajectory. *Guardian*, 25 May 2017.

- RJ Richard, 68, slipped his mobile phone into his pocket for the first time – and saved his life. He was mowing his lawn in Covington, Louisiana, when a stray .45 bullet fired in nearby woods lodged in its case. At first he thought a stone kicked up by his mower had hit him – until he took out his phone and the bullet fell out. *Sun*, 22 Nov; *The Australian*, 24 Nov 2008.







## Weird scenes inside the goldmine

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

### WHEN THE COUNT CAME BACK

It's been a funny ol' few weeks in ufology, and that's just the bits I know about. James Gilliland, who personifies Enlightened Contact with Extraterrestrial Intelligence ([www.eceti.org](http://www.eceti.org)), made the enlightened ufologist's classic mistake just before February's supermoon, viz. he made a prediction. First providing as little background, of course:

"The Earth and the collective consciousness are purging. These energies can be overwhelming especially with sensitives and empaths. There are other planetary influences at play, Mars the warring energy, Pluto deep dark releases, combined with this super moon are accelerating this." Then the future: "You will see the deep dark secrets revealing themselves, the true nature of people, 'politicians and dark hearts', the great awakening and house cleaning is in full swing. It is as if a spiritual fire hose was just turned on full. All we can do is surrender, release the past and be the solution... This is a major turning point, the masks are coming down, the truth is being revealed... The games are over, the people are waking up. You are going to see some very short careers in the political and mainstream news. There was an undeniable coup to take out a duly elected president. The Russian hoax has finally come to an end exonerating Trump. Now comes the consequences. The round-up has begun, top people will find themselves soon wearing orange suits in a nice tropical setting... The gold standard has been engaged ending the Federal Reserve... Treasury will take over ending the siphoning off of trillions to the global elite. These next two weeks will see a lot of action. Clearing energies and critical thinking as well as personal responsibility will be the tools necessary to get through these times. The victim roles, blaming, projecting will not be supported with these new energies... Be kind to yourself, others and the planet." I seem to have missed all this. If I'm somehow mistaken – I may have been walking the dog – please send corrections by angemail, on the top of a pinhead, to Fortean Towers.

So much for the future that wasn't. From the past that was, Robert Sheaffer ([badufos.com](http://badufos.com)).

Recent discoveries indicate that extraterrestrials have sent down humanoids at crucial points in our history to guide our evolution. One of these humanoids, a mysterious creature with superhuman powers known as the Count of Saint Germain, may still be among us!!



Rendering of painting of Count of Saint Germain by Jean du Plantier shows remarkable similarity between famous alchemist and UFO investigator Jacques Vallée.



Who was he and where did he come from? The riddle has never been solved. The date and origin of his birth are unknown, as is the date of his death. Incredibly, many historians insist he never died!

LEFT: The Comte de Saint Germain and a strangely bouffant Jacques Vallée.

Homer in a while. If you're coming to them fresh, it won't spoil the originals for you: if anything, the opposite.

In *The Mighty Dead* Nicolson gives a lengthy account of how Milman Parry (1902–35) revolutionised Homeric studies, and of his fieldwork among Balkan epic singers that underpinned his conclusions. Essentially, Parry established that Homer's poetry has its roots in an oral tradition that was perhaps a thousand years older than the 8th-century BCE written versions that we know.

Fear not. Neither Homer nor Parry have anything to do with UFOs, but reflecting on Parry's

blogspot.com) unearthed a gem from *Ancient Astronauts* magazine of January 1978 that suggested (a) that the supposedly immortal 18th-century conman the Comte de St Germain (see **FT146:40-44**) was an extraterrestrial humanoid, sent down "to guide our evolution", and (b) that he "may still be among us!!". In the shape of no less a person than Jacques Vallée. Collapse of stout party. Dr Vallée is and has been many things, and has been around a very long time, but this we would never have guessed. Would he?

And back to the future. We learn that Tom DeLonge, of that Academy we no longer mention, is producing a six-part 'documentary' on UFOs for that paragon of scholarly integrity, the History Channel. Titled *Unidentified: Inside America's UFO Investigation*, it will apparently feature DeLonge interviewing "former Pentagon UFO investigator" Luis Elizondo, who now works for DeLonge.

Whether Elizondo ever investigated a UFO in his life is open to doubt, given the boops he keeps making in public pronouncements on the history of the phenomenon and, especially, the US Department of Defense's insistence that the project Elizondo headed had nothing to do with UFOs anyway. One looks forward to the reviews.

### THE JOYS OF LIT CRIT

I have been reading for perhaps the fourth time Adam Nicolson's brilliant, magisterial treatment of Homer – which, if you haven't read, you should, even if you haven't read

radical approach caused me, along the way, to wish that someone would do the same for ufology. The interlude of dreamy optimism was brief. Such a thing will never happen, and for two basic reasons. To begin with, ufology as a whole is incoherent. It's important to say 'as a whole' because there are sincerely deluded souls out there still who would like ufology to be defined by what they usually call 'serious research', with the Adamskis, Greers, Sitchins, Meiers, Coopers, Ickes, Gillilands, and you-name-thems set outside the pale. But ufology actually encompasses everything from 'serious research' to the mad and meretricious, and more. Its beliefs range from 'aliens' producing magical healing to 'aliens' stealing foetuses, from salvific 'space brothers' to demons – or Lizard People – determined to deprave and have dominion over us, and from 'nuts-and-bolts' machines to interdimensional time-travelling psychic entities.

So, this gives us our second basic reason why a Milman Parry will never arise from *inside* ufology: because there is no common 'ology' there to refocus. It is a faggot of a subject, a bundle of disparate and heterogeneous twigs, all of them pretty queer. Sceptics and analytic academics hold little sway inside this fascicle of fringe pursuits. Though they may have the most interesting, objective things to say about it, they are outside the subject, looking in, some mesmerised by what they see, but essentially invisible to the dedicated. Maybe more on some of those next time.





## A cloud of doubt

JENNY RANGLES shares new research that casts doubt on a classic case of strangeness at sea

Back in 1987 (**FT48:59-61**), Michael Shoe-maker wrote an article about an extraordinary incident reported to have happened off the northeast coast of the USA in 1904. It's a case I've written about in connection with my interest in 'time storms' – natural events that appear to distort the nature of local time and space. While this incident did not clearly involve time distortion, it did seem to be an example of a rare meteorological phenomenon. For that reason, Paul Fuller and I included it as a possible case of extreme weather in our 1991 book *Crop Circles: A Mystery Solved?* However, thanks to a fascinating new investigation by Paul, there are now doubts as to whether this 1904 event ever happened.

This is a summary of in-depth research that Paul has just concluded, aided by access to historical international records, meaning you can now decide for yourself.

The source from which the case was widely known was a report in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* dated 8 Sept 1904 – but earlier accounts have now been found. It claimed the ship was sailing from Romania to Delaware. That was one of several errors introduced by this report, despite it postdating references in the US and UK. However, it does add details not in earlier accounts. For instance, it gives the time and location: "Shortly after the Sun had gone down, and we were in latitude 37 degrees 16 minutes and longitude 72 degrees and 48 minutes." This would be just after 8pm and about 200 miles east of Virginia Beach on the US Eastern Seaboard. Claiming to quote the captain of a British cargo ship, it describes the "sea almost as level as a parlor carpet and scarcely a breeze ruffled the water". You can compare this with words from the same seaman cited later and ask if this is the same voice; or was the reporter writing up a tale he had heard elsewhere and ascribing it to this mariner?

Allegedly, in the gathering gloom, the ship's watchman saw a "strange gray cloud" in the south east. At first just a speck, it quickly grew to the "size of a balloon" as it approached. The cloud had "glowing spots" inside that "became more agitated" as it closed on the vessel. It enveloped the ship and caused its hull to glow like a phosphor flame. Some details here match other similar time storm cases, hence my own interest.

The crew now felt their hair stand on end as if immersed within a huge static charge. The ship's compass was spinning wildly as chains, bolts, spikes and bars – everything metal – was magnetised fast to the iron hull. Even several men together could not free these small objects. A "metallic hellfire" was

glowing around the ship, and the cloud was so dense that nothing beyond its boundaries was visible. The cries of fear faded and "silence" filled the deck, as if all sound was cancelled out. The crew later said their limbs became so stiff they were paralysed. This effect only faded when the cloud dimmed and moved away. The report says it enveloped them for 30 minutes, which seems unlikely.

In 1987, when *FT* first reported this case, it was not clear on what date the incident had occurred, because the story was reported as happening to the British cargo ship *SS Mohican* as it passed through the Delaware breakwater to Philadelphia, PA, from Ibraila, Romania. This scenario, it turns out, could not have happened in late July 1904.

The date of the story breaking was taken to be 30 July 1904, when records show the *Mohican* had in fact *left* the port and headed out into the Atlantic *to* Romania. But no arrival date had been logged by the vessel in any records for the previous week or two, so it was presumed that the events took place about a week earlier (23 July) when coming into port.

Paul Fuller has traced a number of other UK sources, adding some from the USA that I found. They all pre-date the above article by five or six weeks. Paul focused his search on Sunderland; this was the home port of Captain Urquhart and the *Mohican*, so his exploits were of local interest there. Combining these data, we can establish that the first Sunderland reference was a paragraph on 3 Aug 1904, credited to the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in New York, about a "ship in a magnetic cloud". The local paper called the events a "yarn", implying, as did the easy-to-miss coverage, that the story was not being taken all that seriously in Sunderland. It recounts: "The British ship *Mohican*, which has arrived in Philadelphia, reports having passed through a magnetic cloud while approaching the Delaware breakwater. Fire played around the metal ship from stem to stern, the needle of the ship's compass flew around like an electric fan and everything was magnetised. It was impossible to lift even light chains or bars, which clung tightly to the iron deck."

Captain Urquhart was quoted as adding: "The hair on our heads stuck out like bristles and it was difficult to move the arms or legs. Suddenly the magnetic cloud lifted and the phosphorescent glow around the ironwork vanished and things became as usual."

The earliest dated US report I could trace was in California (*Santa Barbara Morning Press*, 2 Aug): "Phenomenon Most Strange – Magnetic Phosphoric Cloud envelops the British ship *Mohican*."

Bylined from Philadelphia the day before and again quoting Urquhart, it says: "When the sailors saw [the cloud] they rushed along the deck in consternation". It added that the iron pieces should have been easy to move if not for the magnetic field. Urquhart claimed he asked the crew to move them in order to "distract their attention" as they were "so upset by the glowing cloud". The captain added that the cloud was so dense they could not proceed and despite his efforts to take their minds off its presence several of the crew fell to their knees on deck and started to pray. Eventually, the cloud began to fade and move across the Atlantic and disappear.

But a potential killer blow to this case comes from a piece discovered by Paul in the *Sunderland Echo*, dated 9 Sept. This is just a day after the widely cited Philadelphia news item. This new article is a short letter sent to his local paper by Captain Urquhart himself, dated by him as being posted from the port of Sulina on the River Danube seven days earlier. The Captain claims he was shown the press reports of what supposedly happened in late July when he arrived in Romania after his voyage from the US to Europe, and wanted to set the record straight. This was because "most of the crew, self included, belong to Sunderland". He thanked the *Echo* for their regular reports on the voyages of the *Mohican* and hoped the paper would continue this chronicle. However, Urquhart wanted now to confirm "the yarn" of "the magnetic cloud has no foundation in regard to the steamer under my command". He pointed out that the *Mohican* left Sunderland on 30 May and arrived in Philadelphia to spend all of July in dock – likely explaining the confusion over the lack of records of the boat arriving on 23 July or thereabouts. It seemingly had been in port for three weeks already by this point. Urquhart further asked his local paper to "oblige by refuting the statement on my authority" – a very clear disclaimer.

So, the story of the cloud seemingly never happened, which causes significant difficulty understanding where multiple detailed, and to some extent varied, references to the events directly quoting Urquhart come from. They first appeared out of Philadelphia soon after the *Mohican* had sailed east across the Atlantic bound for Romania: hence it was a month before the Captain saw and had the chance to refute them.

However, as the story continues to unfold next month, you will see there was another reason for that crucial delay in refuting the story of the cloud – one that may transform our understanding of the case again.



# BUNKER MENTALITY

Dark Tourist **HE SAWYER** visits Kelvedon Hatch Secret Nuclear Bunker to recapture the Cold War paranoia of his 1980s youth and speak with owner Mike Parrish – a man who cheerfully promotes the reality of an English Country Armageddon to visitors from all over the world

SCOTT WYLIE / CREATIVE COMMONS

**T**here is something quintessentially British about the brown signs dotted around the UK, directing the tourist to places of historical, cultural, or geographical interest, and none more so than the one I'm approaching, which informs me that the 'Secret Nuclear Bunker' is 150 yards away. I know the road only too well and start indicating early, dabbing the brakes before the rollercoaster road dips, then blind bends left over the rise, hoping the 4x4 looming large in the mirror is paying attention. I take the hairpin turn-off, leaving the 4x4 and the A128 to meander their own way to Chipping Ongar.

The sealed lane skirts the field. When I first visited, years ago, it was just a lurching, bone-jarring, slightly nervous route created by tractor. The landscape expands as I dribble towards the hollow, then brake, as a herd of deer with fawns roams across my path in a leisurely fashion.

You wouldn't describe Essex as the most beautiful place the British Isles has to offer. It's not the Cotswolds, or Cumbria, but, in fairness to the much-maligned county, it's not the end of the world; and neither is the village of Kelvedon Hatch, population 2,541 according to the 2011 census. It boasts a picturesque church, and the land here has been farmed since long before the Domesday Book was written. Which segues nicely into what it has to offer today's dark tourist.

Deep under the hill topped by the radio mast before me, lies the bunker whence the last great battle between the forces of supposedly good and evil was to be conducted, with no winner guaranteed. The footpath winds into the trees and the signpost switchbacks me down an incline towards an incongruous chalet bungalow at the foot, more suited to a genteel estate on the outskirts of new town Basildon than a copse in Kelvedon Hatch. It was supposed to look like a typical farm cottage, and is nothing like one. Although I know this is merely an illusion, it's still difficult to comprehend what lies inside, up the steps and beyond the porch. Walking through the doors is like stepping



**LEFT:** The innocuous 'farm cottage' that hides the Kelvedon Hatch Secret Nuclear Bunker. **FACING PAGE:** Owner Mike Parrish in the bunker's tunnel, ready for the end.

*It was supposed to look like a typical farm cottage, and is nothing like one*

through the looking glass into another time, one of fear and paranoia, leading inexorably towards a dystopian future.

## GOING UNDERGROUND

The claustrophobic lobby plays host to a small telly screen, broadcasting a looped introduction from the bunker's owner, Mike Parrish, which is a brilliant Orwellian touch, and I do hope that was the intention. Mike, in his role of benign Big Brother, instructs the visitor in the use of the 'wand', a hand-held playback device with keypad that allows you to self-guide at your own pace, in conjunction with visual colour-coded arrows throughout the underground installation. There are separate wands available for children who will be following a tailor-made presentation. The tour was originally self-guided with a Walkman and headphones, but this upgrade is very 1984.

Mike provides succinct commentary, advising when to turn off the wand between points of interest. His narrative is informative, and adroitly droll when discussing the chances of surviving nuclear war.

It all started back in 1952, when the Air Ministry paid Mike's grandfather a visit. They offered to pay £25 per acre for the land in the middle of his farm. Mike tells me: "My grandfather had fought in two World

Wars. He didn't want to fight in a third. Kids today don't understand there was this chilly relationship between Russia and the West, and yet they didn't have a war. But when Churchill came back as Prime Minister in 1951, one of the first things he did was build this, because he knew Stalin couldn't be trusted."

So, the Ministry took up residence on the farmland in October 1952, pouring concrete 24 hours a day, completing the enormous bunker by May the following year, and encouraging Mike's grandfather to farm over the top to project an aura of normality, with 'nothing to see here' despite the large radio mast giveaway. The bunker was initially commissioned as an early warning air defence station, before it became a Regional Seat of Government for London in the event of nuclear attack in the late 1960s. It was a live station with posted guards, ready to accommodate up to 600 personnel, until finally decommissioned in 1992, after the Cold War thawed, when the Parrish family bought the bunker back, opening it up to the public in 1994.

The reception room leads down into a tunnel, 120 yards long, with an offset bend at the end before the main blast doors, to deflect and reduce any shock wave. This kink simultaneously functions as ideal cover for the bunker's armed guards to pick off would-be marauders. Intruders would most likely be the local population who knew there was

SION TOUHI / GETTY IMAGES







a secret underground bunker on their doorstep, and who were seeking shelter in the run-up to, or aftermath of, any nuclear exchange. Whilst the pragmatic view amongst the general public during the simmering Cold War may have been that there would be no survivors, some estimates projected that there might be as many as three to four million of us left after the UK's 200 presumed targets had been obliterated.

While the security at the bunker was concerned with keeping people out, it also had to keep people in. Those on duty would likely have family and loved ones outside, and the desire to be with them at the end would have been overwhelming.

The bunker is huge. There are three floors, with reinforced walls, 10ft (3m) thick. It lies 100ft (30m) under the hill, embedded in gravel to absorb any shock, and is surrounded by a Faraday cage to counter the electromagnetic pulse associated with a nuclear explosion. The installation is completely self-contained: generators, diesel to run them, water, air conditioning providing a controlled environment, several thousand phone lines with which to communicate with the rest of the world, or the outposts still responding, and a BBC studio to broadcast from. Even after a nuclear attack on the UK, there would be a politician to tell you what to do. You'd just need to remember to turn your tranny off before the 'Big Bang' (and retract the aerial), otherwise you might not be able to hear what the politician was telling you.

Moving up the staircase your tour takes in the giant plotting room, with several exhibits from the civil defence era, protective clothing, and a mock-up DIY fallout shelter, an example of what the general public were expected to construct within their homes. There's also an area provided for dressing

up in period fallout costume, where you can have your Nuclear Bunker souvenir photograph taken for a suggested 'honesty' donation. I gaze wistfully at the wardrobe and accessories provided; I really want this. It's a legitimate opportunity to get into heavy rubber and use a respirator, but I'm alone, and there's no one to operate the Polaroid camera contraption in the improvised studio. I could wave to the CCTV for assistance, but then notice the temporary 'Out of Order' note tacked to the camera. I'm crestfallen.

Dotted throughout the bunker are several films relating to the impending nuclear holocaust. Seating is provided, and some of the transmissions are nearly an hour long. Yet they are well worth watching, not only because they are historical documents, simultaneously chilling and hilarious, but because of the setting in which you are viewing them. It adds a certain resonance, which will likely wipe any patronising smile off your face.

If you didn't live through those times then I appreciate that they're difficult to comprehend. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, the only meaningful conclusion to be drawn is that we were all completely insane. Mutually Assured Destruction: MAD. Never has an acronym been so apt. Unfortunately, this period of genuine tension, ramped up with rhetoric and propaganda by both sides, coincided with my own teenage angst. But back then it was all so different, and a time of 'what if?' rather than today's dismissive 'so what?'

### IF THE BOMB DROPS...

During the early 1980s, the fear of Armageddon was pervasive. Former Catholic priest-cum-activist Bruce Kent was marching under homemade bed-sheet banners with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), who rallied across our television screens on

a regular basis, in time and tune with the pop culture of the day. New Wave synthsters Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (OMD) released a single in September 1980 entitled "Enola Gay", after the B-29 Superfortress that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. It reached number eight in the UK pop chart, and number two in Switzerland. The respective chart positions aren't particularly relevant, but it is worth noting that the Swiss record buying public had access to public fallout shelters, while we in the UK did not. I imagine if you were Swiss at that time, you were entitled to feel ever so slightly smug. It would at least provide some consolation for the fact that you had to import decent music for your kids.

Frankie Goes to Hollywood released "Two Tribes" in 1984, with an accompanying video of Ronald Reagan and Konstantin Chernenko lookalikes wrestling to the death in a bear pit, while the rest of the world egged them on. The single went straight to number one in the UK and stayed there for nine weeks. It is worth noting that it had a savvy running time of three minutes and 57 seconds, meaning there would just be time for a final play, come the dreaded four-minute warning.

Ultravox produced "Hiroshima Mon Amour" as early as 1977, then "Dancing with Tears In My Eyes" in 1984, a case of New Clairvoyance, rather than New Wave, given Chernobyl duly fulfilled their prophetic lament in 1986. Heaven 17 cut "Let's All Make A Bomb", and Bowie's 1983 comeback number one "Let's Dance" featured an erupting mushroom cloud in the video. Popular music was agog at the prospect of Armageddon; even Sting wrote a song about it.

While pop going to the well of nuclear holocaust for inspiration might be dismissed as frivolity, the BBC's flagship documentary, *Panorama*, and its reporter, a certain fresh-

PHOTOS: SCOTT WYLIE / CREATIVE COMMONS



**ABOVE:** Inside the bunker: "The ethos is that the bunker staff were here yesterday and they've just all walked out... I wanted to create that atmosphere for people to think what it would be like to live down here for three months, with their families left outside."





SCOTT WYLIE / CREATIVE COMMONS

**ABOVE:** The entrance tunnel to the bunker. **BELOW:** A sectional drawing of the bunker with its 10ft-thick concrete walls below the surface and radio mast above.

faced Jeremy Paxman, could not. Originally broadcast in March 1980, *If the Bomb Drops* can be seen in perfect context on the Kelvedon Hatch bunker tour, which itself features in the film as “an innocuous bungalow, a building so secret we cannot show it to you”.

The documentary focuses on the UK’s lack of preparation for nuclear attack, in stark contrast to that of Switzerland, and demonstrates that our reluctance to contemplate any chance of survival appears in step with the government’s reluctance to spend any money on providing us with any opportunity. The undoubted gallows humour highlight is the vox pop where Paxman asks an old Cockney in a flat cap if he would know what to do in the advent of a nuclear attack?

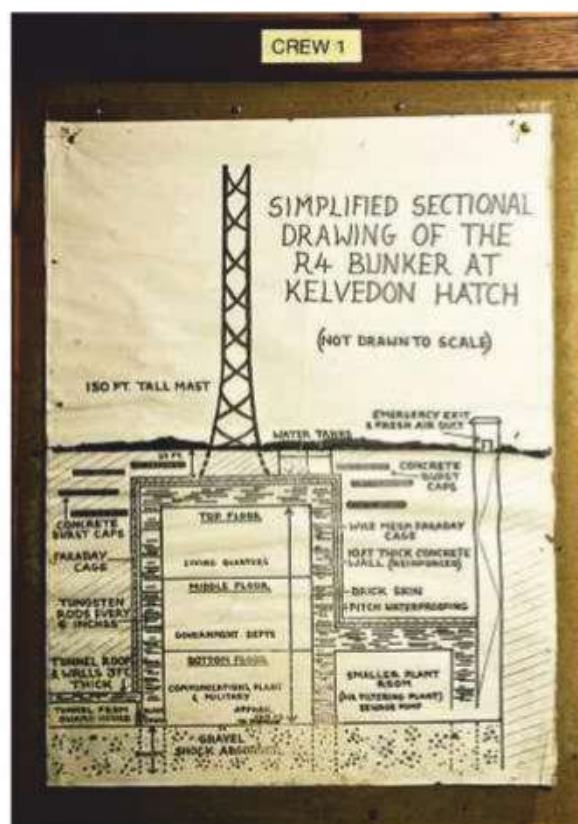
“Waste of time, innit, goin’ anywhere... You’ve ’ad it, aint’cha?”

“Would you take any preparations at all?”

“Well what preparations you got? You’ve ’ad it, aint’cha? No messin’ about, is it? You’ve ’ad it, aint’cha? No use crying over spilt milk, is it?”

*If the Bomb Drops* was commissioned at a time when the symbolic ‘Doomsday Clock’ was set at seven minutes to midnight, the highest state of alert since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. While the majority of the British public were either resigned to their fate or in denial about the possibility of a nuclear strike, the government clearly did not share this view, otherwise there would be no regional command centres playing war games with nuclear attack scenarios, and no

## The Doomsday Clock was set at seven minutes to midnight



command bunker in the first place. The one at Kelvedon Hatch cost £1.5 million to build in 1952. Had it not been decommissioned it would have required a further £10 million to modernise in the 1990s, when it was already costing £3 million a year to keep on standby.

If government planning failed, and regional centres collapsed, then there would likely be total anarchy. However, the BBC documentary showed former Paratrooper Major Tony Hibbert organising volunteers Dick, George, Amanda, and Margaret, all dressed in ‘hazmat’ suits, in a drill which involved them driving a Landrover through a Devonshire village, shouting warnings of impending fallout through a loudhailer. As Paxman observes during the clip, accompanied by the theme to *The Great Escape*: “If this looks funny now, remember, after an attack it may be all we have.”

What wasn’t funny in the slightest was the BBC *Q.E.D.* documentary, *A Guide to Armageddon*. Broadcast at peak-time in July 1982, it detailed the effects of a single megaton nuclear device detonating above St Paul’s Cathedral. Based on scientific assessments, it brought terrifying footage into the nation’s living rooms. Effects from the blast, radiating out miles from the epicentre, were illustrated by an exploding pane of glass lacerating a pumpkin, intercut with the kindly faces of elderly ladies in headscarves. This hazard would ripple out as far as Hornchurch, so I still had a few miles grace, provided it was only a one megaton bomb, and





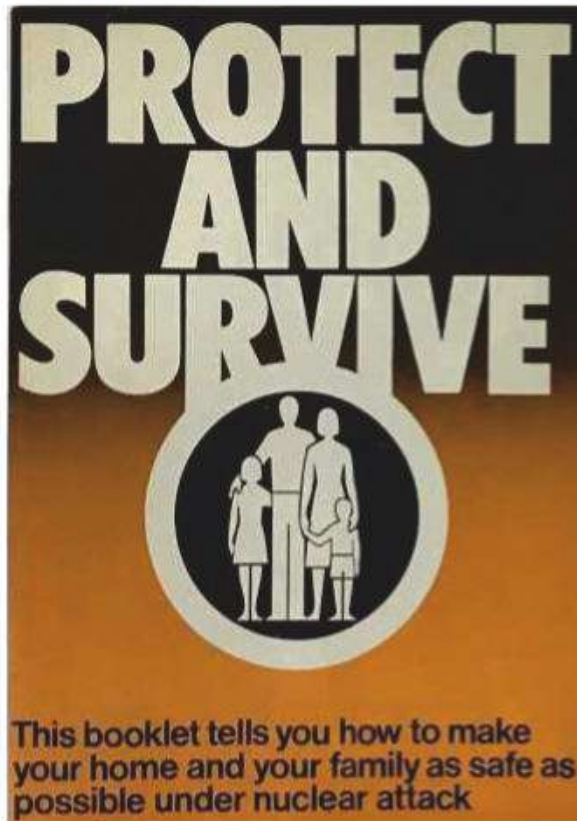
**ABOVE:** 1983: Protestors warm themselves around a camp fire at one of the women-only sites around the nuclear base at Greenham Common, Berkshire.  
**BELOW:** A leaflet published as part of the Government's Protect and Survive campaign, which aimed to prepare the British public for nuclear Armageddon.

it was bang on target. If it exploded off centre, for example over Tower Bridge, there'd be no point drawing the curtains, or sticking tape over the window.

Several years later, having leapfrogged Hornchurch to take up residence in a Romford bedsit, I reasoned that if the bomb dropped, the house, street, and Romford, would simply explode under the pressure. I'd be conveniently evaporated along with my neighbours and millions of bricks, decorated by Victorian chimney pots reduced to hundreds and thousands.

Watching the *Q.E.D.* documentary again, 30 years on, there was clearly no escape, unless you contracted one of 30 UK companies operating at the time, and paid them £10,000–£20,000 to install a fallout shelter in your back garden – providing you had both the money and the garden. Then hopefully, when the sirens wailed, you'd be close enough to access it and possess both a suitable weapon and the requisite moral fibre to repel your neighbours.

Once again, any such contingency was only postponing the inevitable. Food and water will run out, further proof that the sensible would not wish to survive. The Kelvedon Hatch bunker contains a strong room, which held not only state secret documents to be kept from the eyes of those who carried out the orders issued by the bunker commissioner, but also a supply of cyanide capsules. These were presumably to be used once



'retaliation' had been concluded, and all the food eaten, at which point both the bunker and its personnel were redundant, and would be left to their own devices.

Ascending the bunker, the tour takes in the separate accommodation for the top brass: the commissioner, who would be a cabinet minister, an assistant, who would be another cabinet minister, and the Prime Minister. From the roped doorway to his room you can see 'John Major' lying in bed. Every-

one else had to use a 'hot bed' system, across the three eight-hour shifts. The washrooms contain 'ER' soap and 'Government Property' toilet paper, and there was even a field medical centre equipped for operations, and a supply of body bags and collapsible cardboard coffins so bodies could be neatly stacked, out of the way.

Retrospectively, the apocalyptic public mood of the early 1980s can only be seen as embarrassing, and I include myself in this, because I was part of it, fretting with all the other headless chickens. Although I couldn't write a thought-provoking song, I slavishly read about Hiroshima and what would happen in the event of a nuclear attack, and at no point during this time did I ever stop to question what was fuelling my obsession, or how I'd been caught up in the mass angst. Why worry when the truth was: "You've 'ad it, aint'cha..."

#### FOUR-MINUTE WARNING

The obsession with a nuclear strike against the UK appears to stem from the Home Office pamphlet *Protect and Survive*, originally published in 1976, then reprinted in May 1980, and made available to purchase in response to a series of articles in the *Times* newspaper from January of that year. It advises the householder how to make both their home and family "as safe as possible under nuclear attack". In essence, *Protect and Survive* was an exercise in keeping the



‘Gen Pop’ occupied with tasks such as white-washing windows, building a fallout shelter under the stairs, and cutting a trench to lie down in, which now looks exactly like what it was: a convenient DIY grave and burial service in one. The government wanted people to stay at home, not block the roads as they fled to caves in the countryside. The booklet was very short change for the population, to the point that inducing fear comes across as its primary objective. I still have my copy, and it serves to remind me how the government value those they represent.

The newspaper articles, the primetime documentaries, the award-winning TV drama *Threads*, Raymond Briggs’s graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* (turned into a feature-length animation), a plethora of pop songs with emotive videos, CND marches, and the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp opposing cruise missiles on UK soil, all contributed to or fed the tension. There was even a parody poster of *Gone with the Wind*, featuring Margaret Thatcher as Scarlett, in the arms of Ronald Reagan as Rhett, a mushroom cloud rising behind them, with the tagline, “She promised to follow him to the end of the Earth. He promised to organise it!”

As a result, I don’t stress about climate change – because back in the day we only had four minutes. You wouldn’t even get that nowadays. They’ve removed all the sirens, after disbanding the Royal Observer Corps in September 1991 at the end of the Cold War, saving £6 million annually. The government once spent less than 50p per head on civil defence. Now it’s all down to your local authority. Given the challenges faced by Kensington council in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, it’s hard to feel confident about the outcome should any council be faced with a major incident of a CBR (chemical, biological, radioactive) nature.

My own council, in reply to a Freedom of Information request regarding their ability to alert residents of a localised emergency, informed me that the primary means of communication to residents is through “social media and our website”. Perish the thought anyone might be asleep at the time, as was the case with Grenfell Tower. Fallout might not come from a nuclear strike, but an accident, like Chernobyl. Or Fukushima, in case you thought something like Chernobyl could never happen again. It’s all down to which way the wind blows.

The money is still found for the weapons and the submarine delivery systems to deploy them, and there are four bunkers on standby for those who are going to implement retaliation in our name, or most likely in our memory.

## BUYING A BUNKER

We’re sitting in what Mike calls ‘The Naffery’ at the top of the bunker, a combination of self-service cafeteria and gift shop. His Labrador plods over for some fuss as Mike

explains his bunker mentality.

“The ethos is that [the bunker staff] were here yesterday and they’ve just all walked out. I’ve tried not to make it like a museum with cases and cases of gas masks. I wanted to create that atmosphere for people to think what it would be like to live down here for three months, with their families left outside. Very austere, all green and magnolia.”

He’s certainly succeeded in creating the *Mary Celeste* effect. Visit during a wintery midweek, and you may well have the bunker all to yourself, which is simultaneously eerie and exciting. It’s a far cry from when they had to repel protesters at the door.

“CND used to march here regularly. We used to have mounted police charging all over the place!”

He smiles nostalgically. “It was quite good. CND would march here, they would get their pliers out and cut the barbed wire, and a policeman would clap them on the shoulder and arrest them for damaging government property. The press were all there taking photographs and honour was served. Everyone went away for a couple of years and then the same thing happened again. They never actually got into the bunker, and it was all done for publicity.”

Sometimes it wouldn’t be a ‘demo’, but a lone intruder. “When the bunker was still active, we used to have a lot of poachers here, and one Sunday morning I saw a guy, very odd, very suspicious, so I accosted him and called the police, and Special Branch came down. He was a reporter, I think for the *Morning Star*, all very exciting for me as a young lad, being interviewed by Special Branch. And because of that they made it public, and then Paxman turned up.”

Although the farm had bought back the land over the bunker from the government, the bunker itself was a different prospect. When it was decommissioned, the sale was conducted by sealed bids. There were two

open days for prospective buyers, and over 400 people attended. There was no indication as to who was just having a look out of curiosity and who was genuinely interested in bidding. It was also difficult to calculate what a winning bid might be, given the nature of the installation. However, as the farm owned the land on either side of the access road, they erected tight fences, to make it appear as ‘user unfriendly’ as possible. Fortunately, Mike’s bid won, which is why we now have a dark tourist site rather than an electronic testing facility, or a firing range.

“When we bought it, it was in all the newspapers, and so many people wanted to come and see it, so we opened it for a weekend, and it was total mayhem and chaos!”

Mike indicates over his shoulder towards the rear lobby outside ‘The Naffery’, and explains the vexing problems facing those who operate dark tourist sites. The bunker was designed to withstand Armageddon, not accommodate the general public.

“We had to make this tunnel for ‘Health and Safety’. That took a lot of discussion, because of course there was no criteria for a bunker, so they based it on a theatre. We had no idea how many people we would have down here at any one time, and we needed a fire alarm system. We had visit after visit from the fire brigade, and gradually the rank got higher and higher, until we eventually got to the white-collar level, and that was much more sensible, because he devised a route, which was much better than putting a door in here and here – you end up with people going round in circles. Once that was sorted it was a piece of cake, but it took about three to four months to make it safe for the public, which of course it now is.”

“How did you go about promoting the bunker?” I ask.

“We didn’t have to! It was in all the national newspapers. The reason we actually opened it as soon as we got it was because



ABOVE: Accommodation for the ‘top brass’: Prime Minister John Major, tucked up safely in bed.

KELVEDON HATCH SECRET NUCLEAR BUNKER





ABOVE: Bunker owner Mike Parrish relaxes in the Bunker's combined café and gift shop.

we were inundated with people wanting to visit... So, it built its own momentum. We had the people who had served down here, so we held an open day for them, and we got all their histories and stories – my sister is an amateur historian – and it just blossomed. What set us back was when we applied for planning permission. The council only gave it to us for three months – which means you can't afford to spend the £100,000 they wanted to build this exit here" – he waves toward the tunnel over his shoulder – "because you might be closed in three months. They then extended it to six months and we thought, 'Well we're going to have to do this', so we spent the money; but it was always with this uncertainty, and it took about seven years to get full planning permission."

"How do you get the brown tourist road signs?"

"You apply for them and they charge you a fortune. When we first started we had a chalkboard at the side of the road. But we couldn't apply for the brown signs before we got planning permission. When we've done surveys, and asked people how they found out about us, the greatest is 'word of mouth'. The second is, 'we saw your brown sign'. Certainly, our brown signs have gone round the world on the web several times."

## EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP

The Kelvedon Hatch Secret Nuclear Bunker is a prime example of a dark tourism site that responded to public demand. I'm interested in how they managed to equip the bunker so realistically, with period artefacts.

"We were very lucky. The Government spent two years throwing everything out, despite us saying we wanted it, so we went to other bunkers they were closing and rescued stuff from those. We employed one of the former guards who worked here – he was very

tight on the secrecy – 'Surely you can tell us if there were tables in here?' – it seemed a bit daft. But we got some stuff from him. There was a bunker in Scotland, much smaller than this, that I did go and visit, but we were one of the first."

Originally Mike and his father led the tours, but self-touring became a more practical idea, which is when the portable cassette players and headphones were introduced. However, they "went through thousands of batteries", so the wands were introduced. They are ex-Millennium Dome, and can be recharged.

"So, what's involved in the day to day running of a nuclear bunker attraction?"

"Drinking coffee – lots of it! We have lots of filming down here – we've had a feature film, *Let's Be Evil*, which has been released as we speak, and there was a red carpet thing, which unfortunately I couldn't attend."

The adjoining land caters for 'Nuclear Races', an endurance and obstacle course for those hardy souls who like racing each other through the cloying Essex mud. The bunker is also a setting for futuristic, post-apocalyptic LARPing (live action role-play). Mike describes something that sounds like the *Stargate* movie: "They go off and jump through, do a mission and come back".

The bunker also provides a suitable backdrop for interviewing a military talking head if there is a media story regarding Russia. The hundreds of brightly coloured neckerchiefs hanging from the ceiling indicate the number of Scout troops that have visited. They also have 'All Nighters' for the 'Paranormals', or ghost hunters, following on from the television programme *Most Haunted*, which also came to the bunker.

"But nobody actually died here, did they?"

"Well they poured concrete back in the

Fifties, and one morning they found the foreman's hat where they'd been pouring, and he was never seen again. So, is he in the walls, or did he do a 'Lord Lucan' and do a runner?"

While 'The Naffery' is essentially a self-service canteen with a coffee and tea machine, soft drinks cabinet and a selection of cake and snacks, two sides are racked with baskets of souvenirs. How does Mike select what to sell?

"We have very limited room here in the bunker, even for a big bunker. Mostly we have families with children, so I wanted things the children could spend their pocket money on, so nothing too expensive. They might buy a tea towel... We have bullet key rings – the kids love those. Bullet necklaces..."

Other souvenirs include Russian hats, which also do good business, and there are fridge magnets, thimbles, mugs, and other novelty knick-knacks, copies of *Protect and Survive*, and assorted postcards, eight for £1. There is even a Russian translation of the bunker guide available for visitors from the former USSR. The whole operation is covered by an "honesty box system", so when you return your wand at the end of the tour you can buy a drink, snack, and souvenir while paying your entrance fee. There's a basket of change available. And it works. Mike says that although they have CCTV throughout the bunker, "99.9 per cent of people are honest." He estimates they get around 60,000 visitors a year, which now includes a growing captive audience of school kids.

"It's now in the National Curriculum, stages 2, 3 and 4 – the Cold War. So, we find we are getting more schoolchildren here."

"You probably know they produced another *Protect and Survive* about 10 years ago? Everyone got one through the post, but nobody kept it. They reinvented the wheel, but if you speak to anyone they say, 'I don't even remember!'"

"I don't even remember!"

"Every household got one, but they didn't call it *Protect and Survive*, they called it something else..."

"I've still got the original. I keep it in my desk."

Mike laughs.

"Just in case!"



Extracted and adapted from HE Sawyer's *I am the Dark Tourist: Travels to the Darkest Sites on Earth*, Headpress, 2019, £15.99, <https://headpress.com>

HE SAWYER has been traveling to dark sites for 40 years, although he's only recently become aware of this. When he's not writing he's painting, or hiding in plain sight behind a mask at Torture Garden.

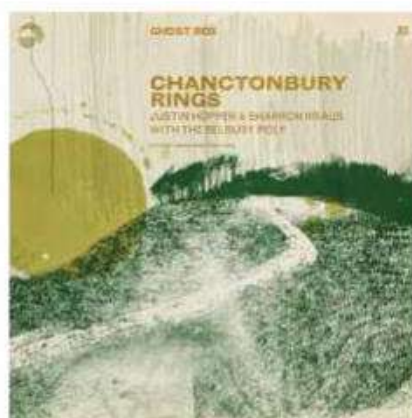


# THE HAUNTED GENERATION

## BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY...

Are you craving the oddly warm reassurance of 1980s Cold War paranoia? Is it impossible for you to walk past an electrical substation without recalling crackly Public Information films, and 16-year-old Jimmy's stray frisbee wedged into a tower of humming transformers? Do you still feel mild disquiet at the sight of the faceless Edwardian children in the opening titles of *Bagpuss*? Chances are, you're one of the 'Haunted Generation'. The article that I wrote for FT in 2017 (FT354:30-37) resulted in an overwhelming reaction from readers keen to share their own recollections of growing up in the "creepy" era; that vague 1965-85 sprawl of inappropriate children's television, radiophonic music, and the vague disquiet of an older, grottier Britain. So I'm delighted to have this opportunity to provide updates on the work of some of the artists, writers and musicians who contributed to that feature, and others whose creativity has been similarly fuelled by the potency of their childhood memories.

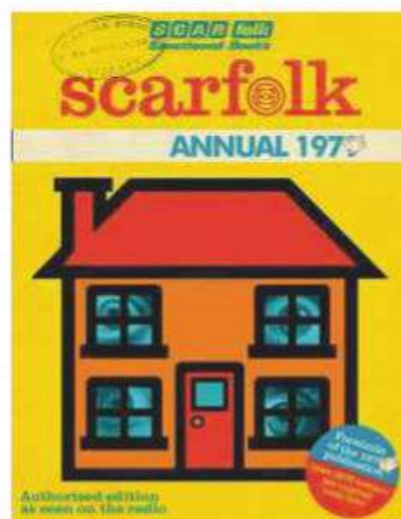
Frances Castle, whose evocative artwork adorns the covers of releases on her own Clay Pipe Music label, has just completed the first instalment of her debut graphic novel *Stagdale*. Set in 1975, it sees 12-year-old Kathy and her recently divorced mother beginning a new life in the titular village, where the discovery of a 1938 diary written by Max, a young Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, puts Kathy on the trail of long-lost Saxon treasure. "It's a little bit inspired by programmes like *Children of the Stones*," says Frances, doubtless striking a chord with many who recall this creepy 1977 HTV series, and *Stagdale* certainly boasts a similar ambience of muted, rustic disquiet. The novel can be ordered from claypipemusic.com, and is accompanied by



a wistful EP from Frances's musical alter ego, The Hardy Tree.

Fans of vintage electronica have cause to be excited too, as a new interpretation of a lost work by Delia Derbyshire sees the light of day, on the Buried Treasure label. Delia is rightly revered for her work with the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, including her pioneering 1963 arrangement of the *Doctor Who* theme. By the 1990s, she had become somewhat reclusive, but still befriended musician Drew Mulholland (aka Mount Vernon Arts Lab, whose 2001 album *The Séance at Hobs Lane* is a Quatermass-inspired riot of gothic radiophonica) and presented him with a late 1960s score of original, unrecorded music, giving her blessing to a new interpretation. The result, *Three Antennas in a Quarry*, is a 12-track collection of dark, ambient soundscapes. For more details, visit [www.facebook.com/buriedtreasurerecords](http://www.facebook.com/buriedtreasurerecords)

And those keen to combine



their retro electronica with a journey into one of the stranger corners of the English countryside should head to Wiltshire on 17 August, where Buried Treasure overlord Alan Gubby is staging *Delaware Road: Ritual and Resistance...* 10 hours of music, theatre and film inside a secret military base, close to Stonehenge. He has previous form in this department: in 2017, I attended a similar shindig, held deep underground at the Kelvedon Hatch Secret Nuclear Bunker in Essex (see pp30-36). Here, artists including Concretism and the Twelve Hour Foundation provided live soundtracks to a surreal evening of Cold War disquiet and rather intense mummery. This year's celebration is headlined by the founder of Crass (and, indeed, the 1972 Stonehenge Free Festival) Penny Rimbaud, and tickets are available from [www.thedelawareroad.com](http://www.thedelawareroad.com).

[thedelawareroad.com](http://thedelawareroad.com).

It could be quite a summer for mass, organised hauntedness, as I'm also hearing whispers of an exciting event to accompany the next release from Ghost Box Records. The *Chanctonbury Rings* album, out in June, sees writer Justin Hopper, folk musician Sharron Kraus and Ghost Box's own Jim Jupp (aka Belbury Poly) teaming up to take musical inspiration from Justin's excellent 2017 book *The Old Weird Albion*, a psychogeographical ramble through the South Downs. It's a project that Jim tantalisingly promises will be "reminiscent of a 1960s or 1970s music and poetry for schools LP", and the record will be launched at a Ghost Box event in Shoreditch. Details should be "available by the time you read this", says Jim, wryly! [www.ghostbox.co.uk](http://www.ghostbox.co.uk) is the place to keep checking.

To finish off, those intrigued by the recent news that one of artist Richard Littler's spoof Scarfolk posters ("If you suspect your child has RABIES don't hesitate SHOOT") was mistakenly included in the Civil Service Quarterly alongside genuine Government posters from the last 100 years (FT377:8), will be delighted to learn that a Scarfolk annual is on the way – and is available to pre-order now. Richard's online evocation of a dystopian north-western town, all pagan rituals and pylons, provides an immaculately distilled essence of 1970s childhood unsettlement, and encapsulates perfectly those vague, murky feelings of being warned about deadly contagions in your primary school hall.

Send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era, to [hauntedgeneration@gmail.com](mailto:hauntedgeneration@gmail.com), or find me on Twitter @bob\_fischer



# PROTECT AND SURVIVE THE THREADS OF BRITISH DYSTOPIA

ANDY PACIOREK explores some of the strands of small-screen fear that shaped British television's 1980s obsession with nuclear Armageddon and post-apocalyptic survival

Looking back, it's obvious that the British media was determined to instil a mindset of fear and paranoia in the young members of what has been called Generation X – those born between the mid-1960s and early-1980s (not Billy Idol's bandmates).

For a start, there was the multitude of Public Information Films that graced our television screens, alerting us to the many ways we might *individually* die: trapped in a fly-tipped fridge; knocked down by a car when eagerly visiting the ice-cream van to buy a Fab or Zoom ice lolly; drowning in a murky pond amidst discarded condoms and shopping trolleys; being zapped while retrieving that pesky frisbee that got stuck up an electricity pylon. Oh, the warnings of impending doom were numerous, diverse and entertaining. Bob Fischer dubbed this the 'Haunted Generation' for good reason in his recent article (see FT354:30-37). But hang on – what if we were *all* to shuffle off this mortal coil together (albeit some a bit more slowly and painfully than others)? What about Mutually Assured Destruction? What about megadeath (again, we are not talking about the band)?

Film and television mooted a miscellany of novel ways for the UK population to collectively pop its clogs, but let's start with the mother of all forms of mass murder: nuclear war.

## WAR GAMES

When I was a child, it wasn't just the creators of dystopian speculative horror we had to worry about: governmental agencies seemed equally intent on causing a mass spoiling of underwear in a whole generation of British children. These were the days of 'Protect and Survive'. Produced in the 1970s and 1980s at the height of Cold War tensions, Protect and Survive was a public information campaign comprising printed pamphlets and radio and television broadcasts. Its main purpose seemed not to inform the populace how they might escape the coming nuclear Armageddon but to alert you to the grim degradation and harrowing horrors you could expect before you eventually gave up the ghost. Among the sage advice handed out were such gems as: "If a death occurs while you are confined to the fall-out room place



*“Place the body in another room and cover it as securely as possible”*

the body in another room and cover it as securely as possible.”<sup>1</sup> If that wasn't enough to fill the young mind with fear, the point was hammered home by the deep, sombre tones of actor Patrick Allen and a weird and eerie sound-effect that still gives me the collywobbles every time I hear it. The fact that the TV broadcast was made by Richard Taylor Cartoons, the company behind the psychedelic *Crystal Tipps & Alistair* and the animated bits of “The Boy from Space” serial on educational kid's show *Look and Read*, offers no real comfort but simply casts the viewer deeper into some sort of uncanny valley.

But why leave it at that? Why not make a drama out of a crisis? Several in fact. The first of them came in the year of 1965, but was not actually seen on British television until 1985 – this was *The War Game*.<sup>2</sup> Created

LEFT: This *Radio Times* from September 1984 features a harrowing image from the new BBC series *Threads*. FACING PAGE: The BBC waited 20 years to screen Peter Watkins's *The War Game*.

for BBC1's *The Wednesday Play* slot by writer-director Peter Watkins, *The War Game* was presented as a docudrama and filmed in a bleak yet beautiful, black and white, verité style. It is a curious beast, simultaneously ahead of and very much a product of its time. The accents are still rather clipped English, giving the play a feel of old Pathé News reels, but it pulls no punches in depicting just how horrific atomic war is. “Do you know what Strontium-90 is and what it does?” is one question asked of various oblivious people in the streets. Had readers of the *Strontium Dog* comic strip in *Starlord* and *2000AD* been asked after 1978, then they would clearly have been able to answer that it causes weird deformities and diverse superpowers; but the British people of 1965 stand vacant-eyed and clueless as to the effects of radioactive fallout. By the end of *The War Game*, some of them would live to find out, some of them wouldn't. The wisdom, and perhaps the morals, of some of the ‘educated’ characters also seem rather questionable – worryingly so, as reportedly they were based on the actual answers of real individuals questioned. A snippet of a bishop declaring that: “I still believe in the war of the just” is followed by a voiceover informing us that: “Within this car a family is burning alive.” Other delights of *The War Game* include the categorisation of injured people. For example, Category 3 individuals are those so badly injured that the police have to shoot them dead to put them out of their misery. The teleplay ends with the first Christmas after the attack and a recital of the carol “Silent Night”. But this is not some seasonal truce in the trenches of World War I, and there is little hope for the burnt out, bleeding and broken carol singers. Earlier, a group of traumatised children tell us individually of their ambitions, hopes and dreams: “I don't want to be nothing.” We are informed in *The War Game* that many of the events portrayed in this film may already have happened by 1980. They hadn't, of course, but the threat of nuclear war had only become more real and





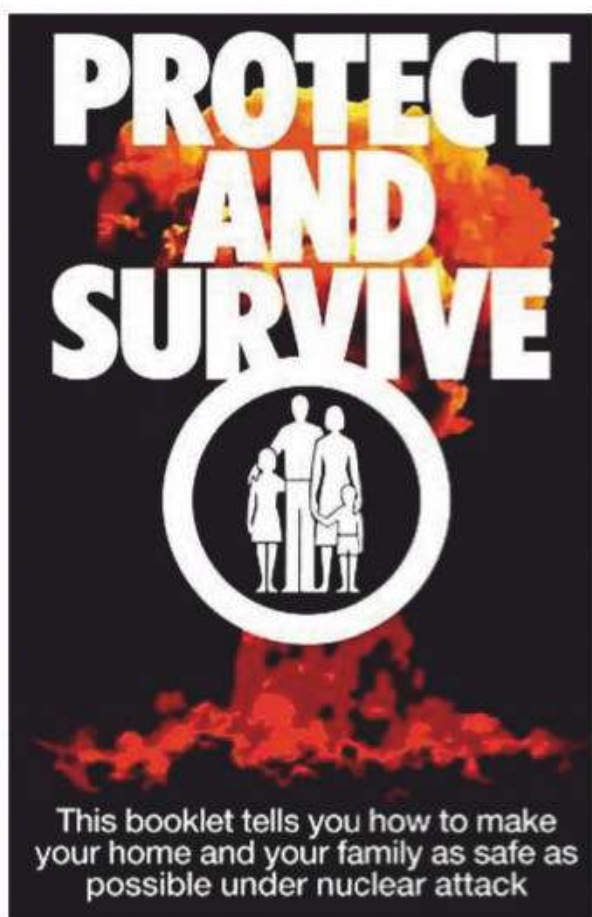


the opportunity to scare television viewers had found its moment. Originally considered too harrowing to be broadcast on television, the BBC waited until 1985 to actually show *The War Game* – but by then we had *Threads*.

*Threads* (BBC, 1984) gave the end of the world a kitchen-sink drama/northern soap opera makeover. Directed by Mick Jackson and scripted by Barry Hines, (author of the bleak but brilliant book/film about a boy and his bird of prey, *A Kestrel for a Knave* or *Kes*), *Threads* tells the story of nuclear war from the viewpoint of members of a working-class northern English community who just want to get on with their own lives: Jimmy Kemp has got his girlfriend Ruth pregnant, for example, while his little brother Michael is focused on his racing pigeons. As the people of Sheffield go about their day-to-day chores, hobbies and domestic dramas, in the background, TV and radio reports (including that scary-as-hell weird library music from the Protect and Survive broadcasts) and snippets of conversation reveal that the Doomsday clock is ticking ever faster. Then, a mushroom cloud appears over Sheffield and things are never the same again.

*Threads* proceeds to take us on a grim and personal tour of the long nuclear winter where the characters who survive the initial impact and firestorm of the nuclear warhead perish through grievous injury, radiation sickness, cholera, execution, murder, suffocation, starvation and many other calamities. *Threads* was a major topic of playground conversation the day after broadcast and I and others of my generation were left thinking that nuclear war was not only possible but probably imminent. I wondered and worried where I would be and what I'd be doing during the four-minute warning, thinking it was too short a notification... what if I was on the toilet when it happened?

Peter Bradshaw, film critic for *The Guardian*, wrote in 2014, 30 years after



*Threads* was first broadcast: “Everyone who has seen *Threads* knows where the real payload of horror comes, and those squeamish about spoilers or thermonuclear birth defects can look away now. The baby is born in the post-nuclear hell. Beyond pain, beyond love, the mother looks into the dirty bundle and she sees... She sees...”

“Well, I still don’t know exactly what. I was watching the film with my girlfriend and her sister in the manky basement of a pretty unsafe house off the Cowley Road in Oxford – a setting which seemed worryingly close to the film. At this moment, my girlfriend’s sister gave a cry or a gasp which I will never forget, and walked out of the room. I looked at her, as a way of not looking at the screen, and then I looked down at the carpet. I was genuinely scared to look up. *Threads* had flooded my body with the diabolic opposite of adrenaline. We all went to bed in utter silence. I have still never experienced anything like it in years of film-going, telly-watching, book-munching, culture-consuming activity.”<sup>3</sup>

It really does have that kind of lasting power. But while *Threads* might have brought the horror home, there was another strange 1986 addition to the nuclear drama that instead focused on the sadness of it all. That was the book and animated movie *When the Wind Blows*. Created by Raymond Briggs, the man behind the slushy-sweet mainstay of Christmas Day TV, *The Snowman*. *When the Wind Blows* introduces us to getting-on-a-bit couple Jim and Hilda Bloggs (voiced by the mellow-toned John Mills and Peggy Ashcroft). Jim and Hilda have lived through the Blitz: they have been here before... or so they think. They are a nice old couple, an idealised nan and grandpa. They are stoic and steadfast and their naivety is endearing. This is an apocalyptic drama, so the ending should come as no surprise; but expected or not, it is tragic.

As Neil Mitchell, writing for the BFI, notes: “While Briggs’s original graphic novel was commended by a Labour MP in the House of Commons, the film was criticised in other quarters as ‘propaganda for unilateral nuclear disarmament’, as well as being ‘smug’ and made for ‘radical yuppies’. But if highlighting the insanity of nuclear war and its irreversible apocalyptic effects in an engaging, humane and emotionally resonant manner is “propaganda”, then so be it.” [4]

To conclude our survey of this particular form of mass-murder in drama, we will go in search of somewhere safe to lay our heads in the aftermath of nuclear Armageddon. In the original novel *Z for Zachariah* by Robert C O’Brien, this was a bucolic America; the BBC changed it to Wales for their 1984 *Play for Today* adaptation. This is different from the other dramas we have looked at, in that the setting is far from grim and hopeless: the main character, Ann Burden, lives in a valley that has by some meteorological miracle been shielded from fallout and firestorms and is clean, green, lush and



**TOP:** The Government’s infamous Protect and Survive leaflet; the cover of Raymond Briggs’s 1986 *When the Wind Blows* offered a tragic response. **ABOVE:** The BBC’s 1984 series *Threads* terrified a nation.





BBC TELEVISION

ABOVE: Terry Nation's *Survivors* was one of the key texts of 1970s dystopian TV, a grim tale of British people dealing with the aftermath of a virulent pandemic.

fertile. Ann lives alone; her family went away one day and did not come back. However, unlike others orphaned and isolated by the atomic devastation, Ann knows how to live off the land, and her land yields well. She is the last woman: A for Ann. Maybe she's the last person too, or so she thinks. But there is at least one other... the last man: Z for Zachariah. Z is actually John Loomis, a researcher from Cambridge, who arrives in the valley one day wearing a plastic radiation suit. The meeting and relationship of the, for all our knowledge, last woman and last man is as wracked with troubles as that of the first couple. However, neither Adam nor Eve had Post Traumatic Stress, radiation sickness or a rifle. Although perhaps not quite as bleak as the other nuclear devastation dramas, *Z for Zachariah* is hardly a laugh a minute and ultimately pours boiling plutonium on any hopes of a post-apocalyptic happy ending. Oh, and if as a kid I'd happened to miss this on TV (I didn't), they got us to read the book at school.

## DOOMWATCHING

There were of course numerous other ways that humankind might wipe itself out. Dr Spencer Quist (played by John Paul) found himself going head-to-head with threats of annihilation on a weekly basis as the head of the Department for the Observation and Measurement of Scientific Work in the BBC series *Doomwatch* (1970-1972). Quist is guilt-ridden about his work on the

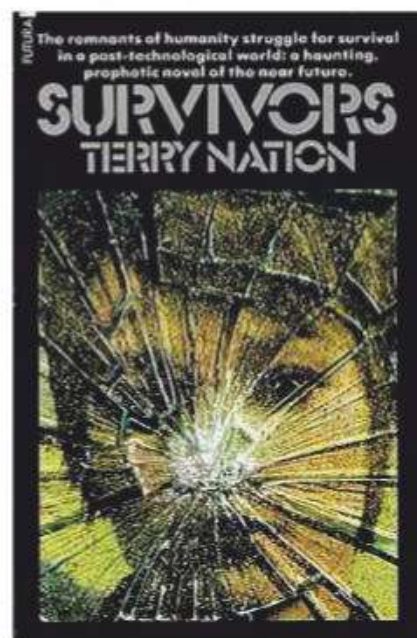
## The world has been brought to its knees by a virulent disease

Manhattan Project, the endeavour that gave the unfortunate world the atom bomb, so to ease his conscience he runs a team battling against such motley environmental and technological threats as a plastic-eating virus, pharmaceutical poisoning, chemical weaponry, toxic pollution, mind control and climate change. In 1972, a *Doomwatch* feature film was released. The premise of the movie is an island with a high incidence of genetic mutation, leaving inhabitants looking like Arthur Mullard with acromegaly. The cause of the deformity turns out to be the contamination of seafood by leaking hormonal chemical

containers dumped at sea.

Not everybody in the various desolate near-futures of British dystopian drama could rely on a governmental team like Quist's *Doomwatch* to look out for them and had to get by the best they could on their own. In *Noah's Castle*, (ITV, 1980; based on John Rowe Townshend's 1975 young adult novel), one family, the Mortimers, take the law into their own hands in a Britain besieged by economic ruin, social unrest and anarchy. Stockpiling food in their house on the edge of town, the family are forced to fight for survival in an increasingly hostile and desperate land; it was heavy stuff for teatime telly.

The threat of starvation and anarchy also formed the backbone of the 1956 novel *The Death of Grass* by John Christopher (filmed in 1970 as *No Blade of Grass*), in which global agriculture is devastated by a virus that preys on grasses and grain crops. One family seeks to escape the growing disarray and despair of London, prior to the capital's inhabitants actually being forced to remain there, and sets off to find food and a new life in the rural north. As might be expected, their journey is not without danger and hardship.





Terry Nation is best known as the creator of the Daleks from *Doctor Who*, but his television series *Survivors* (BBC, 1975–1977; remade 2008–2010) also showcased a battle for life in grim, post-apocalyptic times. Here, the world has been brought to its knees by a highly virulent disease that has killed off much of the population; desperate people struggle alone or in small communities, some with noble intentions, others simply doing anything to survive. The story initially centres on the character Abby Grant trying to find her son Peter, who was at boarding school when the pandemic hit, before following the fortunes of other characters as they try and create a viable community. The 1975 series is more aptly gloomy than the 2008 remake, but the novel has the saddest, grimmest and, oddly, most satisfying conclusion of all.

A curious addition to the dystopian survival genre is *The Changes*, first broadcast by the BBC in 1975. The story is based on Peter Dickinson's trilogy of novels, in which a strange noise emanating from machinery causes people to go full Luddite and smash technology to smithereens, and throw the country back into a pre-industrial mode of life. Told from the viewpoint of a schoolgirl, *The Changes* has a nicely liminal aesthetic, with electricity pylons standing as silent sentinels over the countryside (rather than the murderers of frisbee-throwing children that we all know them to be).

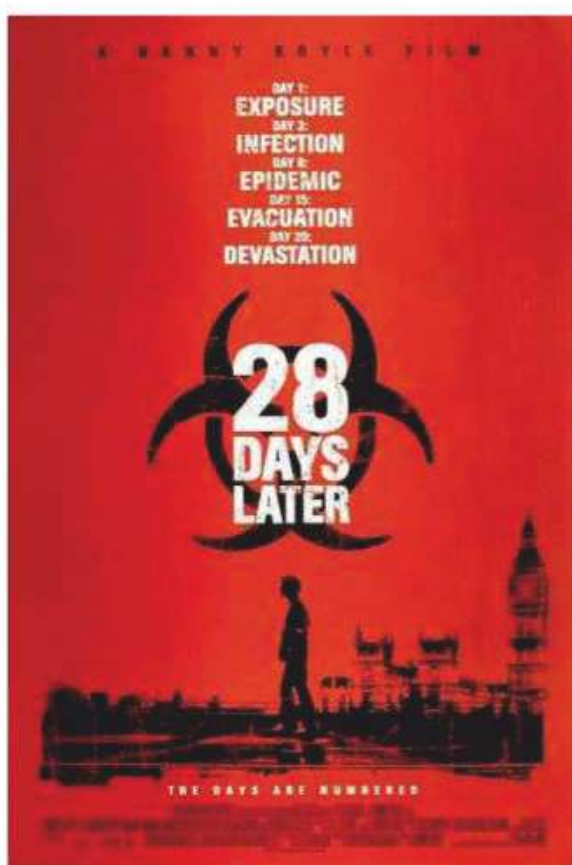
## INFECTED AND INVADED

A weird entry that integrates man messing about with nature with the threat of contagion is the curiously British 1974 Spanish-Italian film *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue* (also known as *Let Sleeping Corpses Lie*) directed by Jorge Grau. In the north of England, the Ministry of Agriculture is conducting tests in a field

using a machine that emits ultrasonic radiation designed to kill insect life. Unfortunately, it also happens to make dead people come back to life as cannibalistic killers. Yes, it is one of the many zombie films that followed in the shuffling, gore-dripping wake of George A Romero's seminal 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead* (which, despite being the daddy of the modern non-Voodoo zombie film, never actually used the word zombie; Romero himself actually initially referred to his walking dead as ghouls). Although the Zombie Apocalypse has become the most popular apocalyptic sub-genre, and while Britain has offered some interesting takes on the subject, such as *Dead Set* (2008) and *In the Flesh* (2013–2014), the subject generally veers out of the territory that concerns us here; however, *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* is a noteworthy curiosity for its odd blend of folk horror and urban weirdness.

There is another film worthy of inclusion here that also, on the surface, resembles a zombie movie, but in which, again, the word 'zombie' is never uttered: Danny Boyle's 2002 horror film, *28 Days Later*.

The film opens with animal rights activists releasing a test subject chimpanzee from a research laboratory. Alas, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, for this primate is not a jolly tea-drinking PG Tips chimp but a Rage-infected psycho – Rage being a mutated form of the Ebola virus,



ABOVE AND TOP: Danny Boyle's 2002 film *28 Days Later* is arguably a modern zombie movie viewed through the prism of the older British dystopian horror tradition.



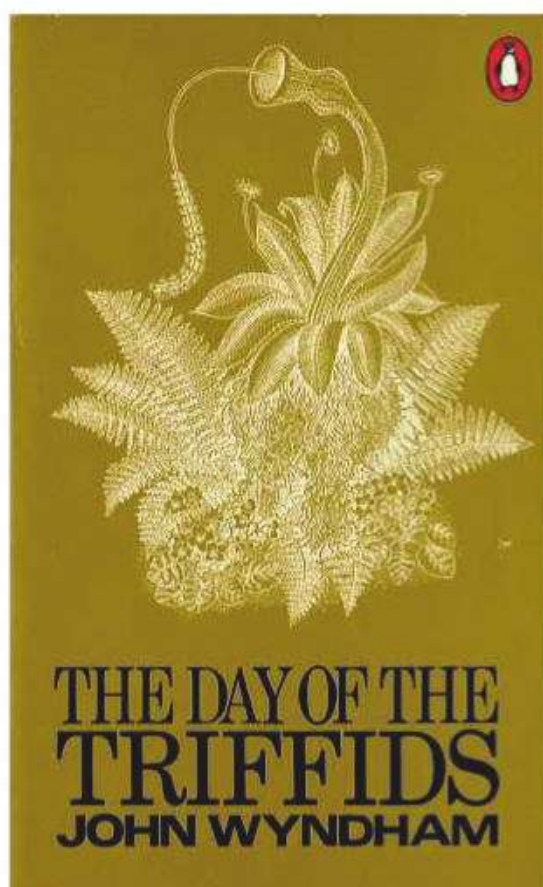


**LEFT:** John Mills faces a proto-crusty cult in Quatermass's last screen outing. **BELOW:** John Wyndham's books dealt with various scenarios in which humanity faced destruction.

highly contagious and extremely dangerous. Though they look like your typical flesh-eating zombies, the antagonists of this film are referred to as the 'Infected', and while explaining the reason for their condition humanises the monsters, it also serves to make them more frightening. The Infected are indeed so terrifying that in one scene a horde of rats flees from them: even pestilent plague carriers fear the Rage virus! We also witness the monstrous nature of non-infected humans when a small group of survivors finds an army encampment. The survivors' hoped-for salvation turns out to be a loss of freedom, and again we are reminded that in such dystopian scenarios both the best and worst of human nature is revealed.

The early scene in *28 Days Later* where Jim (Cillian Murphy) emerges from a coma and roams the deserted streets of London is evocative of a work by an earlier British master of speculative horror, John Wyndham: *The Day of the Triffids*. Written in 1951 and first filmed in 1962, it was also the subject of a 1981 BBC serialisation. The character Bill Masen is in hospital recovering from an eye injury when he misses a spectacular meteorite display that leaves the majority of the population blinded. As with *The Death of Grass*, we witness an exodus of people from the urban centre of London to the countryside; however, unlike *The Death of Grass*, where plant life is also a victim, *The Day of the Triffids* sees a faction of the vegetable kingdom become predators upon humanity. The eponymous Triffids are a sinister species of venomous plant that are able to move independently; blinded humans are no match for them.

Wyndham was clearly a cheery chap, often contemplating the many different ways the human race might face extinction. In addition to his *Day of the Triffids*, we can add environmental disaster caused by an alien



invasion in *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), the combination of religious fundamentalism and genetic mutation in a post-apocalyptic world in *The Chrysalids* (1955), and surreptitious alien invasion by impregnation in *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), famously filmed in 1960 as *Village of the Damned*.

Wyndham's influence is evident in a number of British dystopian and speculative horror dramas which are marked by a take on alien invasions quite different from the *Independence Day*-style gung-ho and lavish special effects of Hollywood. The British version tends to be grimmer, darker, more socially grounded, more pessimistic and more frighteningly realistic.

Nigel Kneale (obit FT218:28-29) is a significant writer in the history of British TV folk horror and urban wyrd broadcasting, with *The Stone Tape* (BBC, 1972), *Against the Crowd: Murrain* (1975) and *Beasts* (ITV,

1976) all being significant entries in the canon. However, his creation Professor Bernard Quatermass remains the basis of Kneale's best-known work. Long before *The X-Files* were ever opened, the British Rocket Group was investigating the machinations of extraterrestrial lifeforms with Quatermass at the helm. He featured in several BBC serials and Hammer movies of the 1950s and 1960s, but 1979 brought the bleakest iteration of all to the small screen in ITV's *Quatermass* (also known as *Quatermass 1979*, *Quatermass IV*, *Quatermass Conclusion* and *Quatermass: Ringstone Round*). In this serial, an aging Quatermass not only has to deal with chunks of the population gathering and then promptly vanishing in certain locations but the personal tragedy of the disappearance of his own granddaughter. Add to the mix the part hippy/part-punk proto-crusty cult of the Planet People, a Britain in anarchic chaos, and a strange collective of displaced pensioners, and we are in for the weirdest Quatermass story of all. It is revealed obliquely that an alien race is harvesting mankind, presumably for food: the sky grows yellow and sick from their gluttony and the waste products of human meat. The conclusion of the series lands a gut punch of utter bleakness and offers a suitably stark point on which to end this survey.

Contemplating how the world ends might seem a depressing pastime, but the post-apocalyptic dystopian drama has proved a long-running thread in British popular culture, and one that has produced many notable iterations of a bleak and horrible beauty; sometimes, there's even a sublime artistry to the devastation.

## NOTES

- 1 *Protect and Survive*, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Prepared for the Home Office by the Central Office of Information, 1980. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110193.pdf?v=c77f06e782d33a2ec8bf00d7c597ea10>
- 2 <http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/warGame.htm>
- 3 Peter Bradshaw, "Threads: the film that frightened me most", *Guardian*, 20 Oct 2014.
- 4 [www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/when-wind-blows-raymond-briggs-jimmy-murakami](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/when-wind-blows-raymond-briggs-jimmy-murakami).

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# RAISING CHILDREN

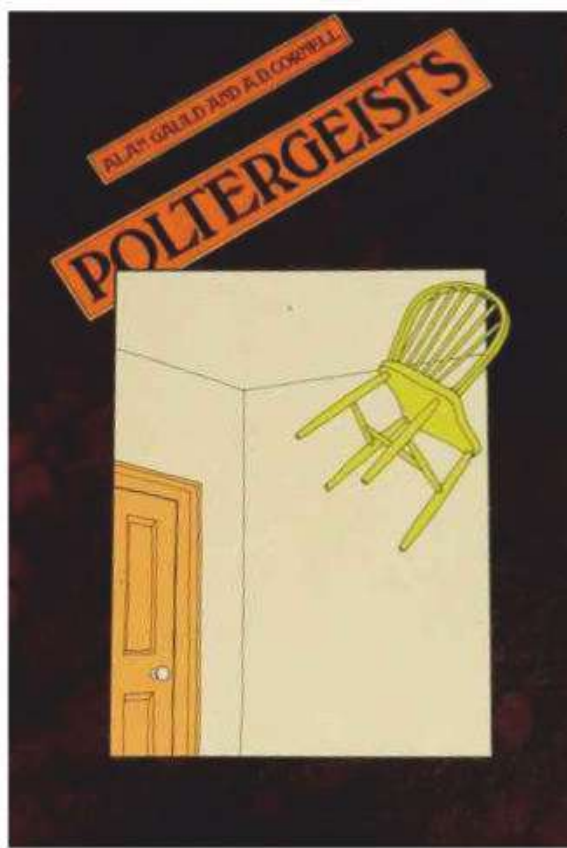
## PART 2: THE POLTERGEIST CONNECTION

**BOB RICKARD** concludes his survey of tales about the levitation and teleportation of children, examining the links between such supernatural ‘transportations’ and outbreaks of poltergeist phenomena, which are so often reported to be centred on young people...

A letter in the *Calcutta Advance* – signed by an accredited advocate and dated 4 September 1930 – made a public appeal for help for a “respectable” (unnamed) family in the city, who were devastated and financially ruined by a poltergeist’s 12-month reign of terror. This “invisible and destructive agency” made food, utensils and other items vanish “under their noses”. Loud knockings pounded all the doors of their house at night and even in daylight, and clothes, on pegs or “inside steel boxes”, were set alight. A veritable “hailstorm” of brick chunks would fall inside rooms. At the height of this persistent poltergeistly misery, their eight-month-old baby was inexplicably “transported to the roof of the three-storied house”; and, it is said, the family’s three-year-old boy died after he was unaccountably “thrown into a well”.<sup>1</sup>

It would have been of little comfort to the *Calcutta* family to know they were not alone in their plight. A similar but earlier example of the dangerously capricious nature of poltergeist ‘entities’ is the jeopardy inflicted upon a baby in the Lombardian town of Pavia, sometime in the 1620s.<sup>2</sup> Hieronyma was a pious married woman who had the misfortune to be pursued by a persistent but discarnate sex-pest (in those days thought to be an *incubus*). When she spurned it by having herself, her home and her baby exorcised, it turned to attacking her, leaving visible, livid bruises. “Sometimes, too, while she was nursing her little girl, he would snatch the child away from her breast and lay it upon the roof, on the edge of the gutter, or hide it, but without ever harming it.”<sup>3</sup>

While serious injury during poltergeist cases seems to be uncommon, and deaths rarer still, the supplementary phenomena described here will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the surprisingly large number of destructive poltergeist cases. More commonly, we are told of objects appearing out of thin air, or disappearing from, or appearing within, sealed boxes. A significant number of cases feature reports of children in the household observed rising into the air or vanishing to reappear elsewhere. Sometimes, it is claimed, they



### *A veritable hailstorm of brick chunks would fall inside rooms*

have been carried in the air for considerable distances. Sometimes, the circumstances imply that the transportee must have travelled through physical walls or other solid obstacles; or perhaps (and this is pure speculation), bypassed three-dimensional obstacles completely via a ‘higher dimension’. There is the effective suggestion of teleportation.

In their critical analysis of the characteristics of 500 cases of alleged poltergeist phenomena, Alan Gauld and Tony Cornell have concluded that the unknown ‘agency’ responsible for apporting heavy inanimate objects could well be related to the teleportation of humans. If ‘it’ can do the former, they argue, “there does not seem

LEFT: Alan Gauld and Tony Cornell’s classic survey of poltergeist cases suggested a link between apports of objects and the teleportation of humans.

any reason why [it] should not also move, or apport, the bodies of human beings”.<sup>4</sup> This is important because the elevations of so many of our young levitants occur during very active poltergeist hauntings, a significant number of which began as relatively simple manifestations of knocking sounds.

In their simplest form, we have accounts of percussive noises (ranging from gentle knockings to deafening, wall-shaking blasts) which are not satisfactorily explained, even after investigation.<sup>5</sup> Despite the admissions by the Fox sisters, in 1880, that their communications with an entity they called ‘Mr Splitfoot’ were simple tricks – they spoke of “dropping apples” to make thudding sounds and “cracking finger and toe joints”<sup>6</sup> – the phenomena they ‘exploited’ gave rise to the worldwide movement of Spiritualist séances. It would be too simplistic to dismiss all spiritualistic sonic phenomena with this single association. By this, I mean that the full range of poltergeist sounds have also been heard in connection with animistic or Spiritualist communications – with the dead or with other kinds of entities – in other cultures with no connection at all with Western Spiritualism; which, clearly, the phenomenon antedates.

### **SUFFER THE CHILDREN**

A second recurring element is that of a disturbing level of violence towards the children at the centre of poltergeist cases. A third such element is what has been variously described as possession, trance or some similar dissociative state of consciousness. The levitant is often found in a disoriented state, sometimes described as (or mistaken for) a trance. Fourthly, there is the association of this state with ‘possession’ (whatever that might be). Olivier Leroy notes that several researchers have drawn attention to a belief among Christian exorcists that levitation “is one of the signs of possession”.<sup>7</sup> It is also worth pointing out that many elements of the poltergeist repertoire – including knockings,





ABOVE: An illustration from the frontispiece of Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus triumphatus* showing the 'Drummer of Tedworth'. Glanvill actually spent several nights at Tedworth, the Wiltshire house of John Mompesson, where a whole series of poltergeist phenomena unfolded before multiple witnesses.

psychosomatic trauma to the body, ventriloquism, strange vomitings, levitation and mediumistic states of mind – are found in accounts of shamanistic 'performance' the world over. For that matter, ascension and flight – whether metaphorical, mystical or actual – is regarded as a primary element of the shaman's ecstatic experience.<sup>8</sup>

In part one, I mentioned the cases of Mary Longdon, Margaret Rule and Francis Fry. Mary was the young maid who suffered sudden transportations about her master's house, in Youghal, County Cork, in 1661. She reported seeing grotesque phantoms in the house, and like 17-year-old Margaret Rule of Boston in 1698, would fall in fits "so violent three or four men could not hold her". Margaret also complained of being tormented by "spectres" and, according to Cotton Mather's account, "was

miserably hurt with pins" found stuck into her "strangely distorted joints".<sup>9</sup> In her own convulsions, Mary would "vomit pins, wool and straw" and was pelted by showers of stones *inside* her home – according to eyewitness testimony given at the trial of Florence Newton, accused of bewitching the girl. Even if the vomiting and pins were, as some have suggested, the equivalent of today's anorexia and self-harming, Mary was clearly at the centre of something *imposed upon* her. Joseph Glanvill wrote that stones "would follow [her] from place to place, and from one room to another, and would hit her on the head, shoulders and arms, and fall to the ground and vanish away."<sup>10</sup>

At the height of this paranormal persecution, Mary Longdon would be teleported about the house. "Sometimes she should be removed out of her bed into

another room," wrote Glanvill. "Sometimes she should be carried to the top of the house, laid on a board betwixt two [garret] beams, sometimes put into a chest..." This bears comparison with an account given by Carmen Blacker. In her study of tales of supernatural abduction of children in Japan, she tells of their unexpected return: "Suddenly and without warning, the tales run, the child reappears, deathly pale, in some oddly inaccessible place such as the eaves of the local temple or the space between the ceiling and the roof of his own house. For several days he lies in a daze."<sup>11</sup> We recall that Dazzy's baby (in part 1) was found in the storage space above her mother's bed.

In an earlier article,<sup>12</sup> I told of Francis Fry, the house-boy, who, in 1682, was lifted high into the air and over the house of his



master, Sir Philip Furze, in Spreyton, Devon, and dumped, in a state of confusion, into a bog. He, and Anne Langdon – a young maid in the same household – became the focus of the kind of activity we have seen attributed to mischievous poltergeists, and both were profoundly distressed by their ordeals. Their clothing in particular would be torn to tatters “on their backs” and so rapidly that the eye could not follow the action.

The account goes on to tell of one the strangest poltergeist actions on record. “At another time one of his shoestrings was observed (without the assistance of any hand) to come of its own accord out of its shoe and fling itself to the other side of the room; the other was crawling after it, but a maid espying that, with her hand drew it out, and it strangely clasp’d and curl’d about her hand like a living eel or serpent; this is testified by a lady of considerable quality, too great for exception, who was an eye-witness.”<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to believe that this could have been hoaxed by two uneducated and frightened youngsters.

## ROCKING THE BIG HOUSES

Compared to some of our other cases, the disturbances at a large manor house at North Tidworth, Wiltshire, between March 1662 and April 1663, seem rather mild. It is notable for being one of the best and earliest documentations of a haunted English house.<sup>14</sup> Then called Tedworth, it was owned by the family of John Mompesson, a senior Wiltshire magistrate, and a lengthy account was given by Mompesson himself to Joseph Glanvill, who spent several nights in the house in 1662. I’ll omit the story’s usual preamble, linking the phenomena to the curse of an itinerant drummer, as this can easily be found in other accounts. The haunting began simply – like many others – with scratching sounds and knocks in the bedrooms, then quickly developed into drumming and thumps so loud they

were heard in the surrounding fields and in a nearby village. Quite a feat for cracking knuckles or bouncing apples!

The family, staff, visitors, and even inspectors sent by the King witnessed many elements of the usual poltergeist repertoire: particularly that ‘it’ seemed to focus mostly on two of Mompesson’s three children, who were aged 10 and six when it began. (A baby was born during the onset of the haunting but was never pestered by it). Doubters watched the children carefully, but they were too small and frightened to have successfully deceived so many at close quarters for more than a year.

On 5 November 1662, “in the sight of the Company, the Chairs walkt about the Room of themselves”. This time there was no Alice Bell Kirby (see part one) to claim responsibility for ‘commanding’ the furniture to move. Something black jumped onto the younger child, leaving her terrified for hours. At times, ‘it’ “would exactly answer in Drumming any thing that was called for”, prefiguring the Fox sisters’ ‘communications’ by nearly 190 years.

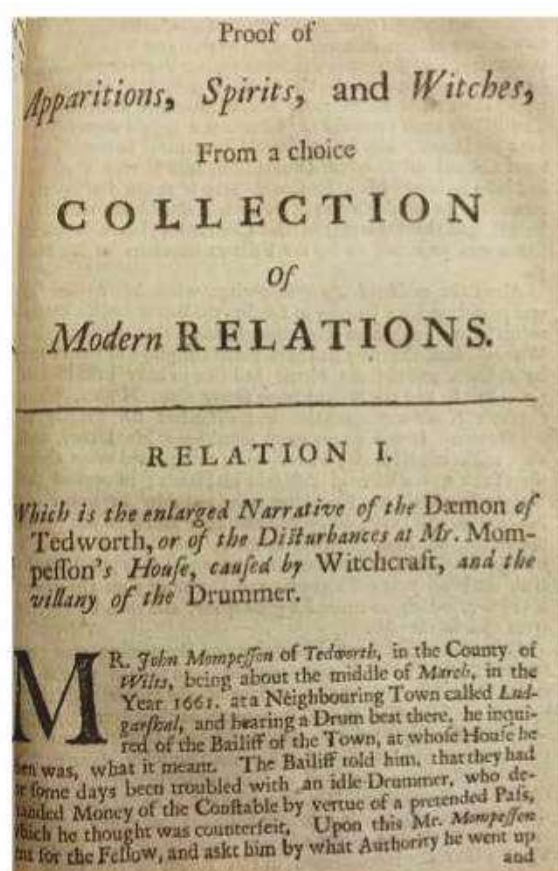
More pertinent for us are the (all too brief) observations that ‘it’ “would lift the Children up in their beds”, and sleeping servants too, sometimes so forcefully “six Men could not keep them down”. Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge that even though large numbers of people were present, the more dramatic events usually took place at night, in private and in poorly-lit rooms. Not the best of circumstances to convince anyone, much less a sceptic. The Sandfeldt case of 1722, however, presents us with an account even more detailed and well-observed. It was translated for the first time into English by the veteran parapsychologist Alan Gauld, who called it an “impressive document”.<sup>15</sup>

Occurring some 60 years after the events in Tidworth, an intense disturbance erupted in Sandfeldt, a village in the Duchy of

Mecklenburg-Schwerin (now in northern Germany)<sup>16</sup> between January and March in 1722. The venue was another large and well populated mansion – like the large houses of Mompesson and Sir Philip Furze – owned by Hans Joachim Dunkelman, home to his wife and children, servants and a number of guests. Over those three months, normal life was made impossible by something that seemed to enjoy “upending the children and dangling them in mid-air”, or vanishing them, only to return them to the same spot some considerable time later.

These occasions were witnessed by the anxious parents, lodgers and others who were able to observe them at close quarters. They were chronicled by Heinrich George Haenell, Dunkelman’s estate manager, who had been ordered to investigate and keep a careful record. Haenell deputised two helpers, a gardener and a watchman, and together they visited the mansion several times a day to make observations and take statements from the occupants and other witnesses, which Haenell then transferred to his journal.<sup>17</sup>

The poltergeist repertoire of destruction manifested here in full force. There were occasions when complete chaos erupted within a room. Hearing terrifyingly loud noises, the frightened inhabitants would flee, returning later to find the room’s contents piled up in the middle of the floor. Even when no one was present, shelves were torn down and furniture sundered, windows smashed and objects flung into the garden. Haenell had observed such an event himself and noted the “pitiable wailing and lamentation from young and old”. Hoaxes by the children or others were quickly discounted as sometimes there were present, among the debris, objects adults could hardly lift, including, once, an “iron ring from a plough wheel” so hot it burned a hand when picked up. As Haenell was leaving a room he had just inspected, he writes, “it



LEFT: Glanvill’s account of the ‘Dæmon of Tedworth’. ABOVE: John Mompesson’s country house at North Tidworth no longer stands; the current Tedworth House (1828-1830) was not the site of the haunting.



again began to racket... I and the gardener went in alone with a candle to see what it might be. It bombarded us about the head and nape of the neck with pieces of lime and earth.”

Something similar happened (but on a smaller scale) at Tedworth when a manservant of the son of Sir Thomas Bennett – who had prior dealings with the itinerant Drummer – stayed overnight with Mompesson out of curiosity.

As Glanvill recorded: “There came one rushing like a Gentlewoman in silk to my mans bed side, he catcht at his sword which was held, and he gave many tugs before he got it, but when he got it, it left him; his shoes were taken away and every thing in the chamber piled up in the chimney”.<sup>18</sup>

### PIGS IN BLANKETS

At Sandfeldt, we again hear of roller-coaster-like beds. “In the early morning of 20 February two watchers... were in the house with their wives. Dunkelman and his wife were also present. After divers strong phenomena, so they assured Haenell the same morning, the bed in the living room, in which Dunkelman’s 13-year-old daughter lay ill, was repeatedly lifted up and down as though swine were rummaging under it. The other children were made to sit on it, but the movements continued. In the end the two wives had to restrain it.”

Although the witnesses at Sandfeldt didn’t actually see any anomalous and out-of-place pigs, the children did tell of seeing a child-like figure in the garden that claimed to be an angel. They talked to it, but the adults watching saw and heard only the children. This same figure told the children how the “wicked spirits” could be expelled from the house.

Following these instructions, a party was assembled to hunt these invisible beings through the house, prodding around them with pitchforks as they went. Curiously, a few days later, the children reported that they saw “a cavalcade of strange rough things, almost like calves, but smaller, fly up out of the shed in front of the house, flogged onwards by a big man with a great whip.”

Like other poltergeist victims, Francis Fry and Anne Langdon, at Spreyton, also saw apparitions of their tormentors, sometimes in the form of an old woman, “sometimes in forms very horrid, now and then like a monstrous dog belching fire.”

Similarly, N’Doua Kouame Serge, a nine-



LEFT: The Lamb Inn, Bristol, was the scene of a classic outbreak of poltergeist activity in the family of Mr Richard Giles. The inn was demolished in 1905.

### CRYING OF THE LAMBS

Not all poltergeist outbreaks include apparitions, but in those that do the phantoms, while often frightening, do not usually molest the children; however, we can find some exceptions in which some fairly bizarre apparitions actually (or seemingly) interact with them. Often, we hear of people being dragged out of bed, or having the bedclothes pulled off them. These events, it could be argued, form one of the simplest expressions of the strange unidirectional force that poltergeists sometimes seem to employ. Some physical interaction is supposed that grips, pulls or projects feet or blankets (more or less) horizontally, but without reaction. Sometimes, our child victims say they see the phantoms that were performing the action.

One of the most dramatic of the bed-breaking poltergeists on record is the haunting of the Lamb Inn in Bristol, which began in December 1761 and lasted more than a year. Like the ‘Drummer of Tedworth’, the story is one of the 18<sup>th</sup> century’s ‘high strangeness’ classics, well documented with close-up observations by multiple witnesses. The events included the familiar knocking and scratching sounds, centred most on Molly, 13, and Dobby, 8, two of the eight children

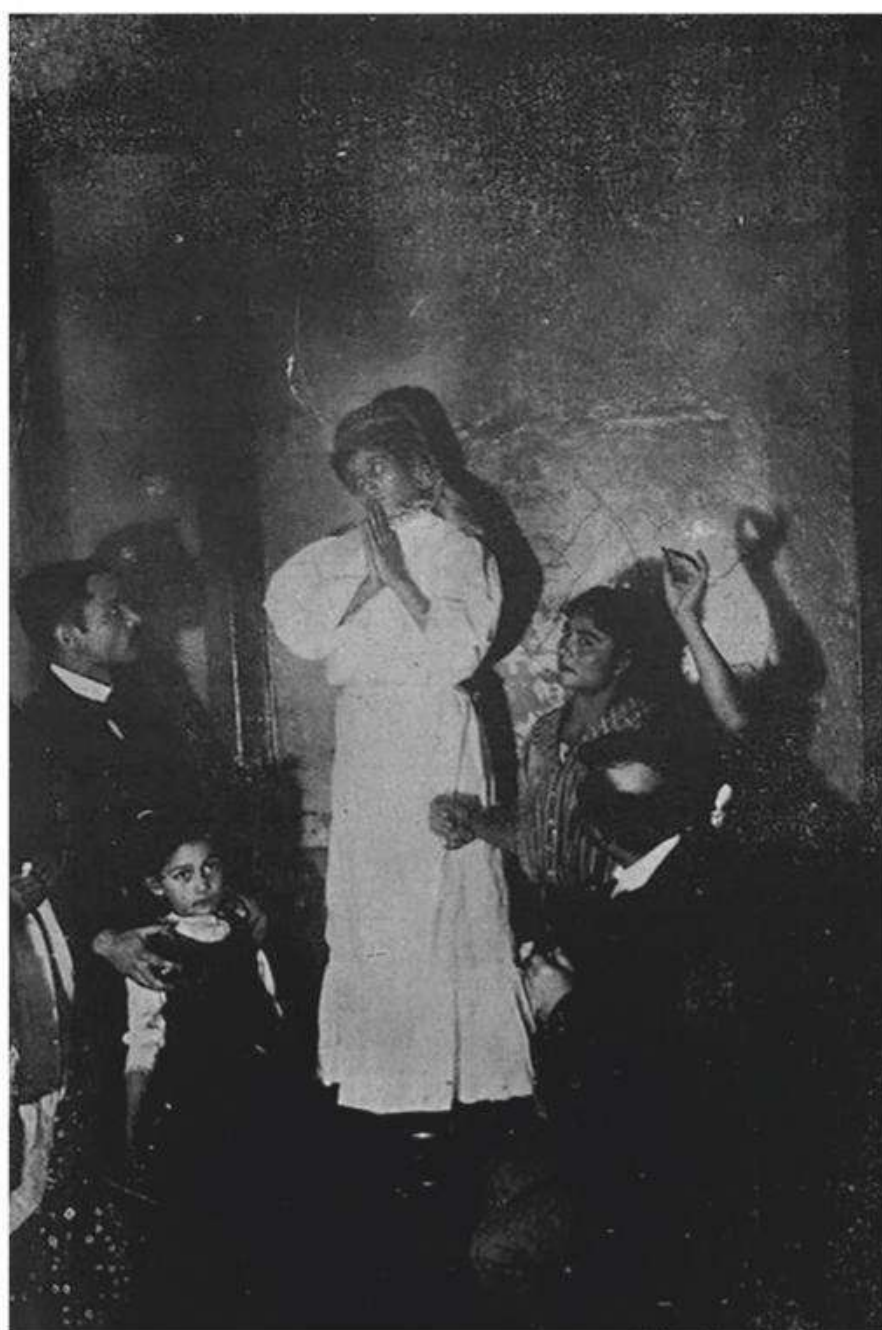
of Richard Giles, who owned the Inn and a wagon haulage business. Again, we learn that the family established their own form of communication with the poltergeist entities. Henry Durbin – an educated and “pious” local chemist – undertook to witness and chronicle the happenings, often mobilising groups of locals as additional witnesses. They regularly searched rooms and objects for hidden wires and kept constant watch on the girls for any signs of trickery.<sup>20</sup>

In direct contrast to the “delight” of the Corralès children (see below), the Giles children at the Lamb Inn were relentlessly terrified by the hurts inflicted upon them by frightening invisible figures that only they could see (and even then only on a few occasions). Nightly, they would be pelted with loose furniture and daily for months their arms and necks were stuck with pins (some difficult to remove they were “so crooked”), scratched to draw blood, and bitten in a way that left seemingly adult-sized teeth-marks and copious amounts of viscous slime described as looking and smelling like saliva. They were often dragged out of bed and slapped hard enough to be heard and leave a red, swollen area.

## *The Giles family established their own form of communication with the entities*

year-old boy from the Ivory Coast (about whom more below), when asked to account for how he was transported out of a church storeroom and into a locked car, said that while he slept: “An ugly strangely shaped person took him to a big house where a winged being came to his assistance. The two fought and the ugly entity was consumed by fire”. The boy added that the ‘angel’ then placed him inside the priest’s car. There were no other witnesses, but the incidents frightened him severely enough for his parents to take them seriously.<sup>19</sup>





**ABOVE:** The children of Buenaventura Corralès, of San Jose, Costa Rica, were involved in a number of séances between 1907 and 1909 – as shown in these photographs from the time – but also were said to have been able to teleport from one room in the house to another, and back again.

Poor Molly was afflicted the worst by the invisible assailant, several times being throttled as if by an invisible hand. Horrified witnesses described seeing the sides of her throat visibly pushed inwards. But Dobby was the one most often transported. “Mr Giles and the servants told me that Dobby was standing by the fire with three or four persons, at 10 o’clock yesterday morning, and suddenly disappeared,” writes Durbin. All rooms were searched for more than an hour, when she was found under a bed. Her father said that there seemed to be an extraordinary resistance to him pulling her out. Dobby told Durbin that something she could not see prevented her from calling out as she was “carried up the stairs and thrust under the bed and held there all the time”.

Two days later, Durbin notes, “Dobby was carried away again”. He arrived just at the point that she was found, dishevelled and frightened, half an hour after disappearing. This time, she said that a “witch”-like woman “in ragged dress” had clamped a hand over her mouth so she could not call out “and carried her up the stairs in sight of the people”. She said she was aware of her feet not touching the ground. Again, on 16 September, she vanished “on a sudden” and was searched for. An hour later, she was

found in a nearby garret, three stories up, under an old bed, but in a locked room, the bolt being too high for her to reach.

These curious ‘abductions’ occurred on other occasions and followed the same pattern: carried upstairs by a ‘phantom witch’, jammed under a bed and rendered unable to move or call out, like Mary Longdon, until she was found. There are elements here that suggest this might be a variation of the ‘night paralysis’ syndrome, causing us to wonder whether this condition is not limited to the ‘twilight’ states of sleep but can, on occasion, afflict those who are ‘awake’.<sup>21</sup>

On the evening of 19 February 1762, the girls were locked in the parlour with two observers because they were afraid of Molly “being carried off at night”. When Durbin visited the inn to see how they fared, he learned that the children had already been pulled out of bed several times “by the neck, in their sight.” As he entered the parlour, he saw “very strong gentlemen hold each child under their arms as they lay on their back [as] they cried out they were being pulled by their legs. ‘Major D’ held Molly with all of his might and put his knee against the bedstead, but cried he could not hold her.” He estimated the force to be greater than

three hundredweight. “They were both pulled to the end of the bed [where] the Major fell.” The Major declared he “did not believe there was anything preternatural in the affair [and] tried again above 10 times.” Durbin confirms that he saw the children repeatedly “pulled to the bed’s foot, and both the Major and the other gentleman pulled after them, though they held them with all their strength, the children crying with pain.”

Durbin himself tried to hold back Dobby with the same result. The girls told him that “they felt hands pull them by their legs and I saw the black and blue marks on the small of their legs, as if hands had done it.” The sceptical Major began cursing because he was “so confounded”. He took a candle to look under the bed but, instantly, “he felt [fingers] catch hold of his wrist” gripping him so hard that “the prints were very visible and grew black the next day. He was *now* very certain no visible power did it”. Durbin left at midnight, while the Major stayed with the family. The next morning, he told Durbin that what he saw “was quite shocking”. The children were no longer being restrained but still pulled out of bed “and dragged about the room, as it were by the neck, though he saw nothing that did it, the children crying



out much.” About two in the morning, “it acted so violently” that he called in a coachman and footman to help.

Unable to keep the girls in the bed, they dressed them and tried to take them outside, all the while being jostled by forces they could not see. Recall that Christo’s wife (see part 1) felt her ankles grasped and her weight seemed to increase, apparently hindering their attempt to go up the stairs. Once they reached the kitchen, “the children were pulled towards the ceiling with such force that [the helpers] were all tired with holding them, though above a dozen were there. When they held their arms and legs, then their bodies and necks were pulled so that all were astonished. Four stout men could scarcely hold one child from being pulled away; and sometimes they seemed suspended in the air.”

## THERE AND BACK AGAIN

There were other incidents at Sandfeldt which, Gauld adds wryly, “bring that case to what many will regard as the very apex of incredibility”. These began on 5 March 1722, when Dunckelman’s youngest child, aged three, was found suspended upside-down on the living room table, “nearly suffocated”. The boy said that “a little white girl” had put him there. Five days later, this same boy was several times “carried up into the air” in front of his fearful parents. One evening, a month later, while all the children were playing together on the floor, the eldest and the youngest girls suddenly disappeared from amongst them – so the remaining children told their parents. A search was quickly mobilised which moved through the house. Half an hour later both girls suddenly reappeared, standing on the floor where they had vanished. The next day the same thing happened, only this time their 10-year-old brother disappeared with the girls. Haenell writes: “This boy was standing with his mother when he vanished. His mother took this very ill, and he was shortly returned, crying, to his former position.”

This display of vanishing and reappearing children is occasionally repeated elsewhere; an example is the children of Buenaventura Corralès, of San Jose in Costa Rica. These children, and the phenomena attributed to them, have remained controversial because of their delight in participating in organised séances between 1907 and 1909. Some authorities have taken exception to the casual (and often unexpected) nature of these phenomena, which, they argue, means we should not take the reports seriously. The allegations of fraud – unproven – leave us room for further consideration. It was said: “Separately and together the children frequently vanished from the séance room, found themselves in the garden and returned, to their great delight, in the same mysterious manner.”<sup>22</sup>

However, Alberto Brenes, a professor at the town’s Law Academy, was intrigued enough to pay some attention. He was present when the three youngest children –

## INDIAN POLTERGEISTS

[To the Editor of THE SPECTATOR.]

SIR,—In his very interesting reply to Mr. Joad, Colonel Elliot writes in regard to poltergeist phenomena: “A possible explanation . . . is that Mr. Joad like other distinguished persons before him has been the unwitting victim of trickery.” He concludes by saying: “he has omitted to equip himself to combat trickery and deception by the means that are recognized as the appropriate ones for the purpose.” I carefully investigated a remarkable case here in Poona a few years ago. Mr. friend, Dr. S. V. Ketkar, and his German wife, both persons of culture (the doctor is the famous Maratha Historian and Encyclopaedist)—suffered terribly for many years, both in name, in estate, in all their affairs, in the general peace of the family, and loss of their servants, and of their general health. Briefly, I may say here that, when I first visited the house that was “afflicted,” the testimony of various witnesses convinced me that it was impossible to attribute all the amazing disturbances to their son, a lad of eight, around whom these activities seemed to gather. When I entered, I asked all those present to leave the room. I placed the lad (“stark naked”) on a small bed, felt his pulse, and told him to “lie down quietly.” I then closed the door and windows and sat down on a chair in a corner of the room. I looked at my watch: it was exactly 1.30 p.m. I put a sheet over him. In about 15 minutes I saw the bed-clothes pulled off the bed on which the lad was lying, the bed was pulled into the middle of the room, and the lad actually lifted off the bed and deposited gently on the floor. The lad could feel the arm of an unseen person at work. A bottle of ink that was on the table by the window was flung towards me, and so was a glass paper weight which narrowly missed my head. The lad’s toys were violently flung about from the corner of the room. I was astounded, and told the parents, that I found that malobservation, illusion, &c., could not (as I had previously suggested) account for all this.

The next day I called again, accompanied by some friends, a police officer, and an irascible old Major (who had settled the whole problem by the simple process of calling me a “liar,” when I related to him the happenings of the day before). On this day, even more remarkable and unaccountable phenomena occurred. Here I can only mention one incident. It was broad daylight (2 p.m.), a small table apparently untouched by anyone, came hobbling across the room to the verandah where we were all sitting and talking. It came directly towards my friend (the Major) imprisoning him in the arm chair on which he was sitting. That evening we were all invited to dinner at the house. All went well till half way through the meal. My friend’s glass fell down. The salt-cellar, cruet, &c., began “to do the Charleston,” so to speak, before our eyes. The whole contents of the table were cleared by unseen hands. My friend (the Major) promptly got up and said “good night”, and left. The police officer also very suddenly remembered that he had another “urgent case to investigate”—of a more terrestrial nature.

All this, and many thousands of other instances are recorded in a day-to-day diary of events which I kept from June, 1928, to January, 1930. (Most of them were published in *The Times of India* and in the *Statesman*.) After infinite havoc had been wrought, they slowly subsided, and the family has been enjoying comparative rest and peace ever since.

Malabar, I find is also an area especially afflicted by poltergeist phenomena. But what are we to say to these bizarre phenomena? All the provisional explanations that may be urged in regard to “spiritualism,” are completely out of court in this very puzzling phenomena of poltergeists. And all talk that I and many other witnesses were merely “victims of trickery and deception,” &c., is wholly absurd. In Wesley’s “Journal,” I note that Epworth Vicarage was affected in 1716. It was the subject of a long investigation and careful record by his son John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who came to the conclusion that the origin of the “disturbances” was “Satanic.” Southey, in his “Life of Wesley” states that “the testimony is far too strong to be set aside because of the strangeness of the relation.”—I am, Sir, &c.,  
J. D. JENKINS.

Poona.



LEFT: A letter to the *Spectator* from a Mr JD Jenkins, who witnessed the handiwork of the Poona poltergeist at first hand. BELOW: DR SV Ketkar, whose family were at the centre of the Poona phenomena.

aged between seven and 10 years – were suddenly no longer to be found in the séance room. “A few minutes passed in absolute silence. Suddenly we heard knocks coming from the pavilion; we turned up the gas [lighting]. The doors were examined and found to be completely closed. Two persons were deputed to look for the children. When the door of the room was opened they were found standing in a row, talking and laughing at what had taken place. They said that they had been brought there, one by one.”<sup>23</sup>

“The two investigators then asked the spirits to repeat the translation in the reverse direction; they recommended the children to remain silent where they were, and locking the door, returned to the séance room to give an account of what had happened. We resumed the séance after taking the necessary precautions of locking the doors. Then ‘Ruiz’ [a ‘spirit guide’] came and after recommending all to keep up their spirits, said in a clear and energetic voice: ‘Let the children come.’ Immediately one of them called out: ‘We are here.’ The light was turned up and the three children appeared in a line in the same order in which they had been previously found. On this occasion all three had been transported at the same time.” For all I know, it may be a tall story, so my search for corroboration is ongoing.

## THE KETKAR BROTHERS

Our penultimate case involves the Hindu family of Dr Ketkar, a respected Marathi historian and publisher, in Poona, India, in the late 1920s. Living with the family was German born Miss H Kohn (a lecturer in languages at Deccan College, Bombay University) and her sister (who was married to Dr Ketkar). The haunting of the brothers – Ramakrishna Baphat, 18, and Damodar, 10 at the time of Miss Kohn’s report – was called by Harry Price “the most amazing (and one of the best authenticated) poltergeist cases... to come under my notice”.

After their mother committed suicide and their father died in 1920, Damodar was sent to an orphanage from which the Ketkars adopted him four years later. Meanwhile, Ramakrishna tried to earn a living but ended up “half-starved and miserably exploited”. He was repeatedly sacked because poltergeist phenomena interrupted his work. Dr Ketkar tried to employ him in his printing business but, here too, the “supernatural” incidents quite literally spooked his fellow workers, who requested his removal. In April 1928, Ramakrishna finally came to live with the Ketkars, the result of which was that the focus of the poltergeist seemed to switch to Damodar.<sup>24</sup>

In the period 1927-1930, thousands of the curious visited the Ketkar home and





ABOVE AND LEFT: The 'teleporting boy' N'Doua Kouamé Serge, and the Ivory Coast towns in which he appeared (from **FT101:20-21**).

observed first-hand the daily appearance and disappearance of objects, their flights through the air, and falls "from mid-air" of personal and household items, money, fruit, and other objects. Sometimes there was a delay between the vanishing of a familiar object in full view, which could not then be found, and its reappearance – as though they suddenly went forward in time. Miss Kohn writes "Where these objects are, when they are held in suspension for minutes, hours or whole days, is a complete mystery." There was even a correspondence for some months in the *Times of India* in 1928, such was the fame of the Ketkar poltergeist.

To cut a very long story short, there were times when – as in many of our other cases – the harmless phenomena turned "positively vicious" as Gauld puts it. Damodar was bitten and slapped, and his clothes and bedclothes were cut and torn. His baby sister was cut and pricked and once almost strangled when her bib inexplicably tightened up with additional knots. Dr and Mrs Ketkar themselves were also pinched, scratched and slapped loudly by invisible hands. Like the unfortunate Dobby, they also had an "unpleasant" saliva-like slime smeared over them.

The teleportation incidents alluded to in the *Times of India* correspondence occurred towards the end of the period covered by Miss Kohn's diary. Several times, Damodar claimed to have been raised up and transported into a car in a garage, and on one of these occasions the garage had been locked so that he had to open the door from the inside. Ramakrishna claimed to have experienced transportations prior to 1924, when the Ketkars began to look after him. As Gauld cautions, we only have the brothers' word for these relocations. "[Damodar] seems, however, to have been thoroughly frightened by them, and after the first one he became very ill."<sup>25</sup>

## *"I believe he is possessed by a demon," said Father Kouakio*

### TRANSPORTED BY A DEMON

As he passed through Africa's Ivory Coast in 1993, the widely travelled fortune sage (and/or con man; see obit, **FT274:24-25**) Ion Alexis Will, spotted a remarkable story of a teleporting boy. It had come to public notice that the priests at the Catholic Church of St Augustin in Yamoussoukro were agitated by the boy's apparent ability to pass into and out of locked rooms. On 18 August 1993, N'Doua Kouamé Serge, then aged nine, had turned up at the mission seeking food and shelter. He was fed and locked in the church's storehouse for the night. When the store was opened in the morning the boy was gone. After a search, he was found fast asleep inside a priest's locked car. The priests decided to keep a close watch on the boy. The next day, he vanished as he ate breakfast with other people and could not be found until he was spotted, slightly dazed, outside the church.

His interest aroused, the chief priest, Father Emile Kouakio – and Kambiré Elie, a journalist from the newspaper *Ivoir'Soir* – attempted to trace the boy's origins. He had stayed at the house of one of Yamoussoukro's officials, where they in turn had traced the boy to the town of Duékoué, 155 miles (250km) away. At Duékoué, he had been found wandering the streets in a daze and taken to the police station where the officers

had conducted their own investigation.

The Duékoué police established that Serge's hometown was Tiassalé. In 1989, at the age of five, he was taken to hospital in Tiassalé after a sports injury but disappeared *en route* (it is not said how), and found himself in San Pédro, 200 miles (320km) along the coast. His father set out to collect him (it is not said how he learned where his son was) but by the time he got to San Pédro, the boy was missing. He was then found again, dazed, 410 miles (660km) inland, in the town of Odienné. The police inquiry established that the boy had turned up in a string of other towns – including Arrah, Dimbokro, Séguéla, and the capital Abidjan – hundreds of miles apart, spending months, even years, at these locations.

As the story of N'Doua Kouame Serge's nomadic life was pieced together,<sup>26</sup> it was obviously circumstantial and far from conclusive. However, those who were closer to him than we are – his various benefactors – were all in agreement that there was something very strange about the boy's vanishings and appearances. "I believe he is possessed by a demon," said Father Kouakio, "an evil spirit that teleports him."

### UNDERARM TACTICS

The disorientation induced in the young 'travellers' by the teleportation process may be due to a number of things. Firstly, it is no surprise that, given their age, they might be unable to comprehend what had just happened and articulate it. Secondly, the levitant could well be in an altered state of consciousness and unaware that any transition had taken place. Consider the reply of Mary Longdon when she was "asked how she knew she was thus carried about and disposed of, seeing in her fits she was in a violent distraction? She answered, she never knew where she was till they of the Family and the Neighbours with them would



be taking her out of the places whither she was so carried and removed.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, perhaps, like Dobby, some active ‘thing’ or process prevents them from calling out or speaking.

When asked by the reporter to account for his travels, N’Doua Kouame Serge simply said: “I don’t know. I’m here and suddenly I find myself in another town.” In almost the same words, Alfredo Pansini (see part 1) told the editor of the *Corriere delle Puglie*: “I don’t know how to explain what happens to me. What happens seems to be a succession of events without any reason, without cause. The change of place seems to happen before my eyes, with no one making it. And my own person, suddenly, is located in another place without knowing how and why.”<sup>28</sup>

In Alberto Brenes’s account of the teleportations of the Corrales children, he tells how he too was curious about “how they had been carried and they replied that they had felt a pressure under the arms, then they were lifted up in the air and placed where they were found, but they could not tell us anything more.”

The Poona case provides, quite possibly, our best observation of a teleporte ‘arriving’. It was given in the detailed account provided to Harry Price by Miss Kohn. It is unusual, too, because the elder boy, Ramakrishna, seemed to be quite clear-headed. Mrs Ketkar, in a letter to her sister, Miss Kohn, wrote that “early on the morning of 23 April 1928, [Ramakrishna] suddenly materialised in front of me... like a rubber

ball. He looked bright but amazed, and said ‘I have just come from Karjat’ [some 37 miles/60km from Poona]. He didn’t come through any door.” Miss Kohn continued: “My sister describes the posture of the boy as having been most remarkable. When she looked up... she saw him bending forward; both his arms were hanging away from his sides... his feet were not touching the floor, as she saw a distinct space between his feet and the threshold. It was precisely the posture of a person who has been gripped around the waist and carried, and therefore makes no effort but is gently dropped at his destination.”<sup>29</sup>

## ANOTHER WORLD AN EYE-BLINK AWAY

My final strand possibly challenges our everyday view of things the most. It links some of these stories with a hint that, during the period of their ‘vanishment’, the children visited or became aware of *another* place (or believed they did). It is difficult enough to know what to make of the levitation narratives, but this aspect of the teleportation variant lifts an already extraordinary phenomenon into the realm of the fantastic.

In Carmen Blacker’s survey of Japanese cases, she wrote: “When the abducted has recovered sufficiently he tells as best he can what has befallen him. Sometimes he is a halfwit when he recovers and is able to recount nothing of his adventures. But more often he relates that a tall stranger

appeared while he was playing and carried him off. They had gone on a long journey over mountains and seas, sometimes into underground passages and caves, sometimes as far as the Great Wall of China, sometimes as far as the sun and moon.” Always, when he – or she – felt homesick he, speedily and without warning, found himself back home. In the oriental fairy-tale variants, of course, much time would have past while he was ‘away’, relativistically, sometimes finding no one alive who knew him as a child.” In the Western variants, it is the sudden exclamation, by the flyer, of a forbidden phrase or holy name, which abruptly ends the journey, plummeting them out of the sky.

Here is one sample of several similar accounts, translated by Carmen Blacker from the Japanese folklore research of Yanagita Kunio. It tells how “on the night of the 19th of the fifth month of the year 1808” a boy in the Kumano district “went out to the lavatory and did not return. They searched everywhere in vain until in the small hours of the morning he was discovered standing on the eaves of the go-down, his top hair cut off and his clothes covered with cob-webs and ears of susuki grass. For three days he slept soundly. Then he woke up and told how a mountain ascetic had appeared, taken him by the hand and flown up into the sky. They had flown a great distance at an incredible speed, alighting now and then on various holy mountains which he described accurately. He was enjoying himself very much and would have liked to see more



ABOVE: Dr Shridhar Venkatesh Ketkar (top left) and family, photographed some time in the 1920s. Damodar stands to the right of Dr Ketkar, and Miss Kohn – who passed on details of the poltergeist phenomena surrounding the family to Harry Price – is seated to the boy’s left.



places, but was worried about his family at home and begged to go back. From Kurama they had come home in one leap and he had found himself standing on the eaves of the go-down with the lanterns of the search party flashing below.”<sup>30</sup>

## PARSING STRANGE

A big difference between these Oriental cases and the Western variants seems to be that in the Far East they have been socially and culturally normalised; accepted into the general culture, for example, as a genre of Buddhist exemplary tales if not actual events. They have become, or are generally held to be, perfect examples of what might have been imaginary social constructions now rationalised as ‘real’ events. In Western culture, on the other hand, such categories as fairylore, ufology, hauntings, demonology and witchcraft – into which the above stories may be classed – and the narratives they contain, are generally viewed with hostility or negativity as fictions, hoaxes or mental aberrations. The chasm between allegedly ‘true’ narratives and those that are evidentially ‘imaginative’ remains unbridged.

In the previous part, we heard that the three-year-old boy of Bracken County, said to have floated “half a mile”, grew up to be “a hopeless idiot”. It is not clear whether he was, actually, intellectually challenged or was so described because, as the report went goes on to say: “Now, a grown man, he talks about another world and seems to be looking into a country [that] exists [out] in space.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps, like Alfred Pansini, he was dreamily recollecting a treasured glimpse of a marvellous place, the way Buddhist mystics pine for their ‘Pure Land’.

In the Sandfeldt case, however, writes Gauld, the children “who were carried off... returned with great tales of having been transported under the earth, where they met a race of little crooked people”. When the children refused the hospitality of their diminutive abductors, they were sent back. Gauld was quick to notice a similarity with stories of kidnap by fairies and their modern counterpart, encounters with ufological entities. “Whether these little people are to be identified with the fairies of British tradition I leave to students of folklore to determine; for clearly these children’s experiences, or else their story telling, had been shaped by the folk-tales then current in Mecklenburg.” To add to the complexity of the subject, there seems to be a degree of correspondence here, between the land ‘under the earth’ visited by Sandfeldt children, the “St Martin’s Land” whence came the ‘Green children of Woolpit’, and the undiscoverable cave under the mountain where the Children of Hamelin were taken by the Pied Piper.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

**1** ‘Visitations of Destructive Agency’, in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 13 Sept 1930; citing the *Advance* (Calcutta),

4 Sept 1930. A sceptical cynic might well dismiss this grim story as ‘most likely’ a callous cover-up of infanticide, but this too is pure supposition. Neither the accusation nor its refutation can be deduced here.

**2** The story of Hieronyma and her *incubus* seems well-known on the Internet; for print, see Rosemary Guiley, ‘The Incubus of Hieronyma’ in *The Encyclopedia of Demons and Demonology* (2009), p.234f.

**3** My quotation is from Montague Summers’s edition of Ludovico Sinistrari’s *Demoniality* (p17), translated by Summers from the Latin. Sinistrari (1622-1701) was a Franciscan historian and theologian who held many senior offices in Pavia, but there is some controversy about the authenticity of his manuscript *De Daemonialitate, et Incubis, et Succubis*. For a detailed discussion of the text, its provenance and its dating, see the thesis by Alexandra HM Nagel, ‘Tracing the mysterious facts in Isidore Liseux’ publication of *De Daemonialitate...*’ on [www.Academia.edu](http://www.Academia.edu) (23 Dec 2008). She concludes that it is indeed authentic

**4** Alan Gauld and Anthony G Cornell, *Poltergeists* (1979), p.113.

**5** I am assuming here that the discussion is about hypothetically authentic cases of unexplained phenomena, not those unequivocally revealed to be fraud or trickery.

**6** See Karen Abbott’s history blog, ‘The Fox Sisters and the Rap on Spiritualism’, [smithsonianmag.com](http://smithsonianmag.com) (30 Oct 2012).

**7** Olivier Leroy, *Levitation* (1928). The authorities he cites are given on p.18.

**8** Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (1964), e.g. pp.477-482.

**9** George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the New England Witchcraft Cases* (1914), p.337.

**10** ‘Relation VII’ in Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus triumphatus* (1681), pp.170-171. Online at Early English Books: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A42824.0001.001/1:19.7?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

**11** Carmen Blacker, ‘Supernatural Abductions in Japanese Folklore’, in *Asian Folklore Studies* (1967) vol.26, no.2, pp.111-112.

**12** See my two-part article, ‘Transportation by an Invisible Power’ in **FT366:44-49** (May 2018), and **FT367:44-49** (June 2018).

**13** There are three versions of the ‘Demon of Spreyton’ story. I’m using Andrew Paschal’s letter to John Aubrey, reprinted in his *Miscellanies* (1696), ch. 14, pp.114-121, online at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A26190.0001.001/1:6.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

**14** Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), as ‘Relation 1’, pp.90-118. More helpful than most of the classical sources is the modern scholarship of Michael Hunter, whose ‘New light on the ‘Drummer of Tedworth’ – *Institute of Historical Research* (2005) pp.311-353 – discovers the considerable contemporary correspondence of Mompesson, Glanvill and other figures interested in the events.

**15** Gauld and Cornell, *op.cit.* My citations are from pp.99-103, 105-107, 111, 114f.

**16** Sandfeldt, near Gadebusch in eastern Germany today, was at that time in the Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin.

**17** Haenell’s journal was published in 1723, at Hamburg, appended with the names of 27

eyewitnesses, declaring under oath that their statements were truthful. Gauld and Cornell, *op.cit.*, p.100.

**18** Hunter, *op.cit.*, p350.

**19** ‘Travelling at the speed of thought,” in **FT101:20-21** (Aug 1977); translated by Ion Will & abridged by Jonathan Bryant from the *Ivoir’Soir* (Abidjan), 7 Sept 1993.

**20** Henry Durbin, *Witchcraft at the Lamb Inn, Bristol* (1800), reprinted 1971. My main quotation is from pp.36-37. The rest are scattered through the slender book.

**21** David Hufford, *The Terror that Comes in the Night* (1982). This is possibly the most thorough treatment of the ‘Hag-ridden’, ‘sleep paralysis’ and ‘bedroom invader’ traditions.

**22** This is one of the very few cases on record that describes the active *enjoyment* of the children involved. In fact, it was precisely this element that prejudiced the opinion of serious investigators about the quality of the evidence and the complicity of the Corralès children.

**23** Gordon Melton, ed., ‘Teleportation’, in *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology*, 5th Ed; cited from *Annals of Psychic Science* (vol. 9). The oldest child, Ophelia Corralès, 18, was frequently described as a ‘medium’ because of the significant role she played in many of the séances and because many of the reported phenomena involved her in some way. Melton advises us that “considerable suspicion surrounds the mediumship of Ophelia Corralès”.

**24** Harry Price & Miss H Kohn, ‘An Indian Poltergeist’ in *Journal of the American SPR* (1930), vol.24; part 1, pp.122-130, part 2 pp.180-186, part 3, pp.221-232. This extraordinarily detailed and extensive diary, covering years of close observation, was provided to the investigator Harry Price by the two primary witnesses, Miss Kohn and her sister Mrs Ketkar. The poltergeist was still active at the last entry on 31 July 1929. Among many secondary discussions of the case, I have used that of Gauld and Cornell, *op.cit.*

**25** Gauld and Cornell, *op.cit.*

**26** **FT101:20-21**.

**27** Glanvill, *op.cit.*, p.170.

**28** *Corriere delle Puglie* (Bari) 10 Nov 1905.

**29** Price & Kohn, *op.cit.* I have quoted the teleportation anecdote from Miss Kohn’s typed manuscript (slightly more verbose than Price’s summary), which passed, via Dr Eric Dingwall, to the University of London Library. I am grateful to Christopher Josiffe for sight of it.

**30** Blacker, *op.cit.*, p113; cited from *Minzokugaku*, II, 9, p.558.

**31** ‘Carried to a Grave’, *Cincinnati Enquirer* (Ohio), 7 January 1900, p.16.

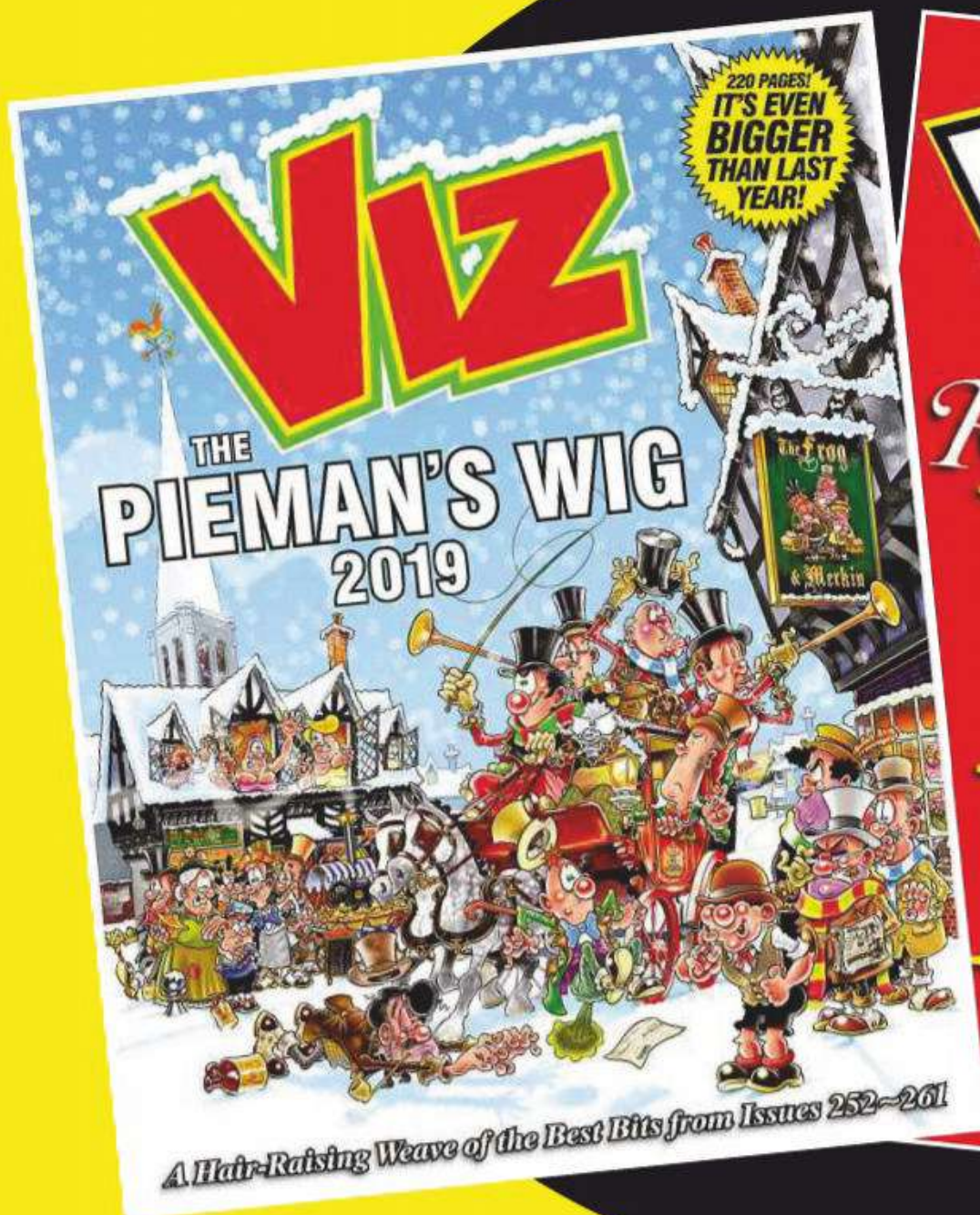
**32** The mysterious appearance of these children is a 12<sup>th</sup> century legend of East Anglia. See John Clark’s excellent overview, ‘The Green Children of Woolpit’, on [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) (28/07/2017) and his ‘The Green Children: A Cautionary Tale’, *Fortean Studies*, vol. 6, 1999, pp.270-277. The fate of the Children of Hamelin, Germany, is an enduring legend of the Middle Ages.

🔗 **BOB RICKARD** started *Fortean Times* in 1973 and was its co-editor for 30 years. He is the author of numerous books and articles on *fortean* and strange phenomena.

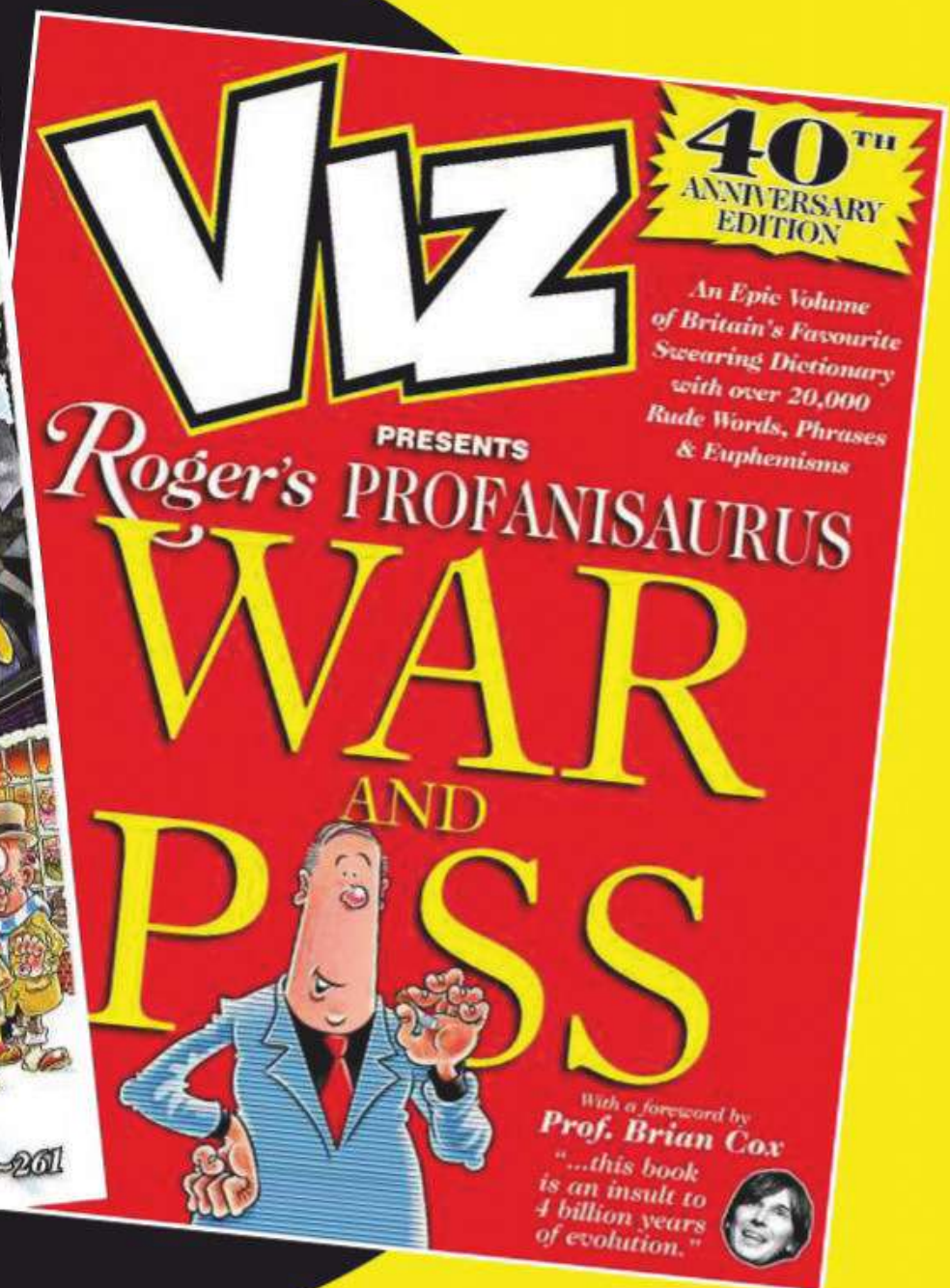




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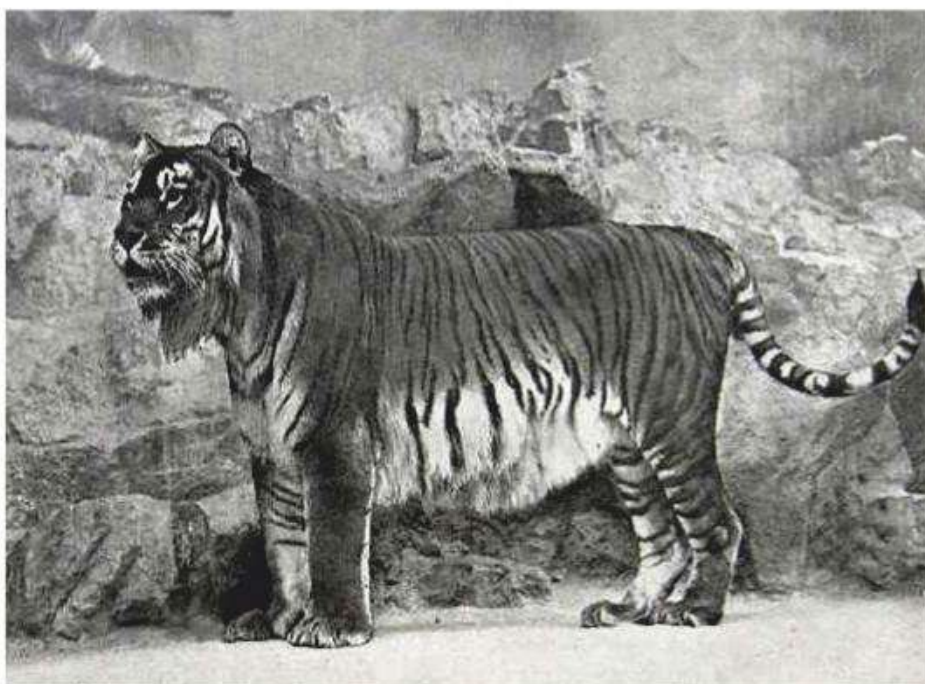
## Return of the Caspian tiger?

**RICHARD FREEMAN** came back from Tajikistan with first-hand accounts of supposedly extinct Caspian tigers – so why is no one interested?

A recurring feature of cryptozoological expeditions is that you often turn up information on cryptids other than your target animal. For example, while hunting the yeti in northern India I uncovered stories of a giant crested serpent known locally as the *sankuni*. In Guyana, on the track of the giant anaconda, I heard of the ape-like *di-di*, the pack-hunting water tiger and a race of red-faced pygmies. In Tasmania, as I searched for the Tasmanian wolf, I was told of encounters with a giant form of quoll – a catlike, flesh-eating marsupial.

In July 2018 I took part in an expedition exploring the two forks of Tajikistan's Romit Valley in search of a relic hominin known as the *gul* (see **FT373:38-43**); again, while looking for one cryptid we were told about another.

The Caspian tiger (*Panthera tigris virgata*) was the second largest species of tiger after the Siberian. It ranged from eastern Turkey through the Caucasus, Central Asia and into western China. Conventional wisdom says the Caspian tiger became extinct in the late 1960s or early 1970s due to habitat loss, though some believe a small population hung on in Turkey into the 1990s. While in the Romit Valley we heard many stories from local people who claimed to have seen tigers – some very recently. All witnesses identified the tiger from drawings and made a distinction between the tiger, the snow leopard and the leopard. This is an overview of what we were told.



ABOVE: A captive Caspian tiger in Berlin Zoo, circa 1899.

Raga Bali is a biology teacher from the village of Tavish on the lower fork of the valley. He saw tigers on two occasions. The first, seven or eight years ago, was in December, when he saw a female with three cubs. He watched as they ate a deer close to the river and had them in view for an hour. The second time, he saw a single adult walking along the opposite bank of the river.

At Qhyshan village on the upper fork of the Romit, a man called Nas Rullo told us of a hunter who supposedly shot a tiger last year. Nas saw a picture of it on the man's mobile phone. He said the authorities investigated but found no tiger. At the mosque in Qhyshan we spoke with a number of elderly mullahs who all said that tigers still existed in the mountains and hunted wild goats and sheep. One was supposed to have killed five domestic sheep in a pen a few years ago, before being trapped there by the farmer and killed by villagers; no one seemed to know what became of the carcass. Another man had seen a tiger seven years earlier. He described it as yellow with white and black stripes, longer than a dog and with a tail between 1 and 1.5 metres (3.3–5ft) long.

Further up the northern fork,

we met a honey farmer called Asid. A shepherd had told him of seeing two groups of six and eight tigers just last year, apparently females with cubs. Some time earlier, Asid himself had seen a tiger when hunting with friend. They had shot a goat when a tiger appeared and made off with the dead animal.

In the village of Vistan we met a 74-year-old mullah who had seen tigers three times, all before the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997). Once he had seen one chasing a deer, and on two other occasions he had seen tigers crouched in ambush. In the next village a mullah called Bobo Saffa said he had observed a tiger from 20m (66ft) away while in the mountains 20 years before. He had also heard the story of villagers capturing one in a pen after it had killed livestock as well as accounts of females being seen with cubs. A park ranger called Namon told us he had seen a tiger as recently as 18 June at 10am. It was high in the mountains, where there was still snow on the ground, and the tiger left when it spotted him. It was the only time he had ever seen one.

Further down the valley, we spoke to a beekeeper called Ahmed, who told us he had seen a tiger in the Pamir Mountains

back in the Soviet era. He claimed his father had once captured one and sent it to a zoo in Dushanbe. He had heard of recent cases of tigers killing livestock.

Upon our return to England I contacted every tiger conservation group I could find online and sent them the information we had gathered on the possible existence of the Caspian tiger in Tajikistan. The silence was deafening. Only one group, The Phoenix Fund, even bothered to send me a reply, which ran thus:

*Dear Mr Freeman,*

*Thank you very much for your letter! It is indeed very interesting information and a photo of a Caspian tiger would be a really great thing to have. If there really are tigers in the Romit area, setting up camera traps for a few months should reveal them. At Phoenix Fund we work only in the Russian Far East and it is way beyond our abilities to do tiger monitoring in Tajikistan. I forwarded your message to a couple of tiger specialists (WCS and AN Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences) who may find this information important. Anyway, we would appreciate getting more details.*

*Sincerely,  
Sergei Bereznuik*

I have heard back from no other group or individual since and find it baffling that nobody involved in tiger conservation appears to be interested in the possible survival of the Caspian tiger. Such a lack of interest reflects badly on wildlife conservation groups and only makes the future look bleaker. If the Caspian tiger is still out there, then how do we protect it if no one is even interested in looking into these witness accounts?

◆ **RICHARD FREEMAN** is a cryptozoologist, author, zoological journalist, and zoological director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology.



## The almasty fingernail mystery

Is a German cryptozoologist in possession of the fingernail of an almasty, the Russian yeti? **ULRICH MAGIN** reports on a specimen that has so far defied investigation.

**T**he whole saga started on 6 January 2018, when Hans-Jörg Vogel, a German cryptozoologist and editor of the magazine *Der Kryptozoologie Report*, saw an offer tagged (in German) “fingernail of an alma, cryptozoology, yeti bigfoot” on the German website of the auction platform eBay. Vogel decided to buy the item, and he knows the real name and address of the seller, who wishes to remain anonymous. The almasty is a Russian form of unidentified primate, living in several parts of Central Asia (see **FT256:46-52**). It is assumed to be more human than ape-like.

According to the seller, he had bought the object in 2002 at a flea market stall in Vienna, Austria, together with a mammoth tooth and a Nanai statuette. The Nanai, or rather, as is now preferred, Hezhen, are a Tungusic people of the Far East, who have traditionally lived along the Amur, Sungari, and Ussuri rivers. The stall reportedly belonged to a Bulgarian who called himself Atanas and described the item as the “nail of a great Siberian ape”. Together with the other objects, he had acquired it in Gorno-Altaysk, the capital of the Altai Republic, where the collection had been assembled some time between 1940 to 1945. Its origin was the region between the villages of Kerneobe and Hashtabol, near Gorno-Altaysk – the very region where Igor Burtsev, the well-known Russian cryptozoologist,



LEFT: Hans-Jörg Vogel holding the alleged almasty ‘fingernail’.

is on the track of relic hominoids (see **FT282:9, 298:30-34, 315:40-44**). Of course, for all this information the only source is second hand, and we do not know how reliable it is.

A few days later, Vogel received the “fingernail” in a parcel. It looks like a gigantic but blackened human fingernail. There are still some dark hairs attached to it. The specimen is kept in a glass case, the specimen holder is some 20.5 by 20cm (7.8 x 8in), and the glass dome covering it is some 3cm (1.1in) high. At the lower left hand corner of the specimen holder there is a label, about the size of a postage stamp,

*The ‘fingernail’ was too large to come from any known primate*

readings in Cyrillic, “АЛАС”, and “Р И” (ALAC and R I, the second might be initials or some kind of abbreviation), but Igor Burtsev, when contacted on 7 January 2018, could offer no translation.

What the seller called a “fingernail” is some 9cm (3.5in) long and 4cm (1.6in) wide, with

a thickness of some 1.5mm (0.06in). Exact measurements are difficult, as the upper part of the glass container is lens shaped and does distort a bit.

One half of the ‘nail’, starting at its root, is covered by coarse black hairs, while the nail itself is brownish in colour. There are several scratches on its surface, while the covering layer has been scraped off at the front of the nail. Looking at the underside, Vogel noticed it was smooth at the front, but after about 1cm (0.4in) was covered with some substance, possibly dried blood.

Vogel posted images of the specimen on a German forum for cryptozoologists. It was soon noticed that the ‘fingernail’ was too large to come from any known primate – and even from a hypothetical alma, which is said to be of normal human size. It was suggested that Vogel should first of all consult professional primatologists and anthropologists, and do microscopic and chemical tests; if this did not reveal the mysterious origin of the object, then a DNA analysis might be the next step. Some commentators also noted that in known primates hair only grows on the intermediate phalanx of a finger and never reaches the nails. Other sceptical voices thought the ‘fingernail’ was actually nothing more than the hoof of a smaller mammal, such as a goat, manufactured and clipped to make it appear more nail-like.

Vogel made contact with Igor Burtsev early on. Burtsev was not aware of any similar specimen in Russia, and he knew only of hair samples from alleged almastys. Those he had in his possession he had supplied to Dr Sykes for his analysis of claimed yeti hair (see **FT308:9**). Burtsev was uncertain what to make of it all, as even gorilla nails were far smaller





LEFT: The glass-domed case containing the 'fingernail'. ABOVE: A close-up of the underside of the 'nail', showing the length in centimetres.

in size than this mysterious 'fingernail'.

"Burtsev informed me", Vogel write to me in January 2019, "that Gorno-Altaysk is located in Siberia, near Kemerovo, where he himself has made many expeditions and made many finds such as footprints and stick structures. He has also collected many eyewitness accounts from the Kemerovo and Gorno-Altaysk regions. After looking at the 'nail' and considering what was known of it, Burtsev said the piece could well be a true bio-sample from a creature of the area."

Another almighty expert, if there is such a thing, is Gregory Konstantinovich Panchenko. Panchenko, a biologist from the Ukrainian city of Kharkov, now lives in Germany. He told Vogel that the nail was so huge it couldn't belong to a hand. "At best, this is a big toe nail. I am not sure if it is not too large even for a large American Bigfoot male, which is much larger than all the other hominoids. Sometimes we find mentions of creatures almost as large as a Bigfoot in Central Asia... [I] once came across a mention of a very large male almighty, comparable in size to Bigfoot. That is, in principle, not impossible... but very unlikely. The problem is

not only in size. When viewed from the front, this nail does not look like a real nail of a large primate. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the former owner of it 'trimmed' it or sanded it from the side where the nail should fit to the finger." Panchenko thought it more likely that it was the hoof of a "goat, sheep, calf, or even a foal, specially treated to look like a nail and dried together with a piece of skin connected to it. Or not a fragment of a hoof, but a fragment of a horn (most likely a goat)." Panchenko said he found it difficult to believe that a specimen taken during World War II would ever reach Europe from the Altai, and that to him the glass container looked quite new. He too suggested a DNA analysis.

Early in 2018, Vogel contacted all major institutes that might be interested in such a find, which – if shown to be authentic – would be of the greatest importance for anthropology and zoology, but he failed to receive any reply or even expression of interest from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, or from Potsdam University, and only a regret that they were unable to help from Eurofins Medigenomix Forensik. Vogel

soon found he also could not interest any popular science monthly in reporting on the find.

While one can easily understand such a reaction, due to the anonymous and sensational nature of the find, such a lack of interest never fails to amaze me. Sure, the possibility that the thing is a hoax, even a crude one, is very high – but if no expert even cares enough to look at it, we will never know. And is the prospect of wasting a few hours so bad when compared to the chance of discovering something genuinely new?

But then the Berlin Museum of Natural History agreed to look at the 'fingernail'. On 8 February 2018, Mr D Willborn, the head taxidermist of the mammal department, met Vogel and a fellow cryptozoologist, the biologist Tobias Möser. After looking at the nail for an hour he had to agree that he had never seen anything like it before, and that it came from no mammal he knew of. He also thought it was definitely not a goat's hoof. From his experience, he dated the glass container to around 1950, which tallies well with what the seller had told Vogel, and again confirmed the unusual size of the object – if it really was a fingernail, then

the primate it came from would stand about 3.5m (12ft) tall! He suggested that it could actually be a toenail, but added that the carving of a goat's hoof to produce a fake could not be dismissed, although he was unaware of how this could be accomplished. He warned against opening the container unless to obtain sample particles for a DNA analysis, which would be the only way to obtain more definite information about the specimen. The famous German forensic anthropologist Dr Mark Benecke offered to do a DNA testing of the hairs "for a moderate fee" but as yet the final decision is pending.

And that is where this fascinating matter rests at the moment. As far as things stand, the strange object bought by Hans-Jörg Vogel appears to be a real nail – but what kind of animal, or species of giant man, does it come from? Only a precise chemical and/or DNA analysis will help solve the mystery. Any offers?

If you can help, please contact Hans-Jörg Vogel via the author.

✦ **ULRICH MAGIN** is a longtime contributor to FT and the author of *Investigating the Impossible* (2011). He lives in Germany.



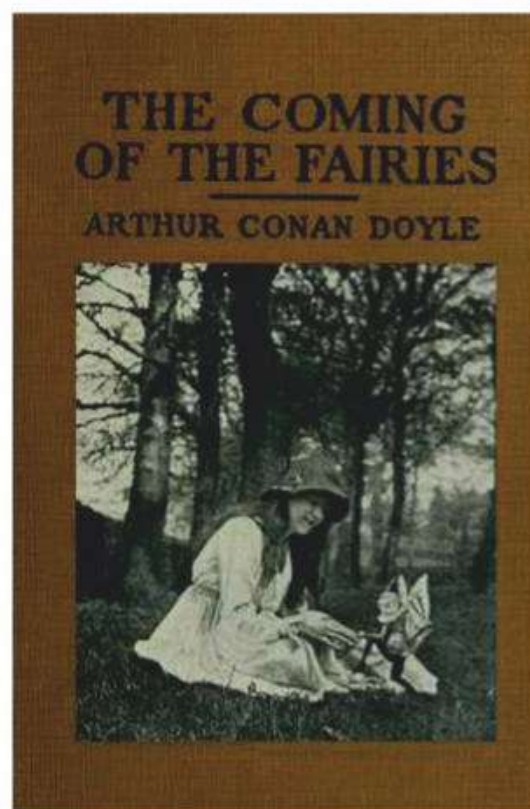
# THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

## 45. A PRESUMPTION OF INNOCENCE

We all know, now, what cousins Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths got up to down by Cottingley Beck in 1917 and '21, and how for over 60 years they steadfastly maintained that the photographs of fairies they took there were the actual dog's-bollocks real thing. We also know that one of the great champions of the photographs was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who, all now seem obliged to say, didn't employ quite the steely logic of Sherlock Holmes in his treatment of the girls' story. That story, well-rehearsed as it is, needn't detain us here (see instead **FT53:48-53, 356:30-35**). Not many, though, have had the pleasure of reading Doyle's book defending the girls' work and the existence of fairies in general.

*The Coming of the Fairies* is fascinating, and useful to forteans, as much as a defence of perhaps the most successful hoax of the 20th century as it is as a defence of the existence of fairies *per se*. In neither case is it quite successful, but that's part of the charm. In the opening chapter Doyle makes plain his commitment: "The series of incidents set forth in this little volume represent either the most elaborate and ingenious hoax ever played upon the public, or else they constitute an event in human history which may in the future appear to have been epoch-making in its character." In light of that (and indeed the latter part of the book), his earlier attempt to appear disinterested doesn't quite ring true: "The diligent reader is in almost as good a position as I am to form a judgment upon the authenticity of the pictures. This narrative is not a special plea for that authenticity, but is simply a collection of facts the inferences from which may be accepted or rejected as the reader may think fit. I would warn the critic, however, not to be led away by the sophistry that because some professional trickster, apt at the game of deception, can produce a somewhat similar effect, therefore the originals were produced in the same way. There are few realities which cannot be imitated..."

There follow various innocent sophisms relying on the notion of 'vibrations' beloved of Spiritualists (and after them all manner of New Age pontificators) to explain just about everything in their system of beliefs. Doyle took a literalist, electromagnetic view: "We see objects within the limits which make up our colour spectrum, with infinite vibrations, unused by us, on either side of them. If we could conceive a race of beings which were constructed in



material which threw out shorter or longer vibrations, they would be invisible unless we could tune ourselves up or tune them down. It is exactly that power of tuning up and adapting itself to other vibrations which constitutes a clairvoyant, and there is nothing scientifically impossible, so far as I can see, in some people seeing that which is invisible to others.

"If high-tension electricity can be converted by a mechanical contrivance into a lower tension, keyed to other uses, then it is hard to see why something analogous might not occur with the vibrations of ether and the waves of light. This, however, is mere speculation..." Indeed, it is. And as we've since explored what happens on either side of visible light, it seems there are no radar people or X-ray people, which isn't exactly unexpected – as Sir

Arthur could and should have known, were he not blindsided by his Spiritualist concepts and convictions. Whatever those kinds of 'vibrations' are, they're not electromagnetic; and calling them 'etheric' doesn't exactly help, after the Michelson-Morley experiments of 1887.

To be fair, Doyle in his way did his best to authenticate the photographs rationally. An appeal to authority fell a bit flat, though. He showed the pictures to Sir Oliver Lodge, *grand fromage* of the Society for Psychical Research: "I can still see his astonished and interested face as he gazed at the pictures, which I placed before him in the hall of the Athenæum Club. With his usual caution he refused to accept them at their face value, and suggested the theory that the Californian Classical dancers had been taken and their picture superimposed upon a rural British background. I argued that we had certainly traced the pictures to two children of the artisan class, and that such photographic tricks would be entirely beyond them, but I failed to convince him, nor am I sure that even now he is whole-hearted in the matter."

Photographic experts were consulted. All agreed – accurately – that no double exposures were involved. As if it were the only way the pictures could have been fabricated, examiners seemed to fixate on this possibility. "Mr West and another expert" from Kodak considered they could, given the resources, duplicate the pictures. Another detected movement in the fairy figures; the only obvious movement in any of the pictures is of Frances's head, where she seems to be reacting to the leaping fairy, which is within squinting distance (see photograph on facing page).

More sophisticated (and self-serving) arguments were brought to bear on odd aspects of the photographs. May Bowley, one of Doyle's initial correspondents, remarked that "I noticed, as an artist, that the hands do not appear to be quite the same as ours. Though the little figures look otherwise so human, the hands seemed to me something like this. (There followed a sketch of a sort of fin.)" As an artist, she should have known that hands are notoriously difficult to draw or paint: Renaissance artists would charge extra to render them in any detail in portraits. Mrs



Bowley deployed some circular reasoning not atypical of the will to believe: “The whiteness of the fairies may be due to their lack of shadow, which may also explain their somewhat artificial-looking flatness.” In other words, I know fairies cast no shadow, *ergo* these appear as they do. EL Gardner, who was Doyle’s emissary to the girls, contended: “To the objections of photographers that the fairy figures show quite different shadows to those of the human our answer is that ectoplasm, as the etheric protoplasm has been named, has a faint luminosity of its own, which would largely modify shadows.” That the ‘fairies’ might actually *be* flat, artificial cut-outs wasn’t on their horizon; a ‘photographic expert’ had said they weren’t, besides. “It was clear that at the last,” wrote Doyle, “it was the character and surroundings of the children upon which the inquiry must turn, rather than upon the photos themselves.” Of their character Doyle had no doubt. Added to that was his certainty that fakery of such an order was beyond the capacity of two innocent maidens “of the artisan class”.

Indeed, Doyle and Gardner were convinced that the sexual innocence of these two pre-pubertal girls was crucial to their ability to see fairies. As Doyle put it, “it is with childhood that certain forms of mediumship are associated, and there is always the tendency that, as the child becomes the woman... the phase will pass... We fear that it has now completed itself, and that we shall have no more demonstrations of fairy life from this particular source.” Quite how this was also crucial to the way said fairies affected photographic emulsion seems to be a problem neither of them thought to address. In addition, “the need for two people, preferably children, is fairly obvious for photography, in order to assist in the strengthening of the etheric bodies”, while fine weather was essential for the seeing and the photographing: “It is a familiar fact also that psychic phenomena are always more active in warm sunny weather than in damp or cold.” Gardner also comments on “the higher vibrations which we associate with hot sunshine, and which we actually seem to see in the shimmer of noontide”. (No physicist he, then. And so much for photographing spooks in damp draughty castles at night.) Given what we know now about the Cottingley pictures, it would seem that the innocence was all on the side of the investigators.

Doyle was clearly convinced of his own objectivity, going so far as to print several objections to the pictures’ authenticity. “The most severe attack upon the fairy pictures,” he says, “seems to have been that of Major Hall-Edwards, the famous authority upon radium, in the *Birmingham Weekly Post*.” The Major is quite wonderfully Blimpish, and rises to a CSICOPian height of fear of the consequences of dabbling in the



ABOVE: Frances Griffiths seemingly reacts to a leaping fairy in a photo reproduced in the book.

“FAIRY TALES  
ARE MORE  
THAN TRUE:  
NOT BECAUSE  
THEY TELL US  
DRAGONS  
EXIST, BUT  
BECAUSE THEY  
TELL US THAT  
DRAGONS CAN  
BE BEATEN.”

*Neil Gaiman*

paranormal, intoning that “as a medical man, I believe that the inculcation of such absurd ideas into the minds of children will result in later life in manifestations of nervous disorder and mental disturbances. Surely young children can be brought up to appreciate the beauties of Nature without their imagination being filled with exaggerated, if picturesque, nonsense and misplaced sentiment.”

Gardner sauntered out with Elsie to spy fairies, and he at least succeeded admirably. We don’t, alas, know to what extent Elsie was humouring him, or whether or not she thought he was perhaps a bit dotty. But, according to him: “In the field we saw figures about the size of the gnome. They were making weird faces and grotesque contortions at the group. One in particular took great delight in knocking his knees together. These forms appeared to Elsie singly – one dissolving and another appearing in its place. I, however, saw them in a group with one

figure more prominently visible than the rest.” Some sights were creepy: “We catch impressions of four-footed creatures being ridden by winged figures who are thin and bend over their mounts like jockeys. It is no known animal which they bestride, having a face something like that of a caterpillar.” Gardner also enjoys the hospitality of numerous pages in which he describes the life and times of fairies as he understands them. We learn that “the wings are not used for flying” (but not what for) and that fairies don’t eat, but absorb nourishment “directly by a rhythmic breathing or pulse. Resource to the magnetic bath on occasion appears to be their only special restorative.” He doesn’t explain what “the magnetic bath” actually is. A shower of vibrations, perhaps? Fairy *frottage*?

The book reaches its climax with a long extract from ‘Bishop’ Charles Webster Leadbeater’s 1913 volume *The Hidden Side of Things* (we give his title scare quotes, as he had to found his own church to acquire it). He seems to have been everywhere in the world and seen fairies wherever he went. Doyle endorses it: “Speaking of the national characteristics of fairies, he [writes] with all the assurance of an actual observer.” In Java, for instance, Leadbeater tells us: “A striking local variety is gaudily ringed with alternate bars of green and yellow, like a football jersey. This ringed type is possibly a race peculiar to that part of the world, for I saw red and yellow similarly arranged in the Malay Peninsula, and green and white on the other side of the Straits in Sumatra.” *But do they understand the offside rule?*

In Ireland, Leadbeater outdoes the Irish. On the sacred hill Slieve Namon, he sees “the intensely active and mischievous little red-and-black race which swarms all over the south and west of Ireland”, but higher up “the hill-side was populous with the gentler blue-and-brown type which long ago owed special allegiance to the Tuatha-de-Danaan.” But neither of these “ever ventured to trespass upon the space round the summit, sacred to the great green angels who have watched there for more than two thousand years, guarding one of the centres of living force that link the past to the future of that mystic land of Erin. Taller far than the height of man, these giant forms, in colour like the first new leaves of spring, soft, luminous, shimmering, indescribable, look forth over the world with wondrous eyes that shine like stars, full of the peace of those who live in the eternal, waiting with the calm certainty of knowledge until the appointed time shall come.” Doyle expects us to believe all this. Elsie and Frances could have told him a thing or two.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Coming of the Fairies*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1922.



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## B is for Boomers, C is for contactees

The baby boomer generation was born into a decade of profound societal change. Religion, SF, consumerism and Cold War politics fed into it... and into the nascent contactee movement

### A for Adamski

#### The Golden Age of UFO Contactees

Adam Gorightly & Greg Bishop;  
foreword: Douglas Curran

Gorightly Press 2018

Pb, 422pp, illus, ind, \$24.95, ISBN 97817266116712018

We view the United States of the 1950s as being defined by Eisenhower, the Cold War and *Leave It to Beaver*. However, it was a decade of considerable transformation – politically (the broadening of the Truman Doctrine and the nuclear arms race); sociologically (the development of suburbs, automobile culture and rampant consumerism); and culturally (the Beats, free jazz and existential philosophy, among others).

These changes would later feed into the Cultural Revolution and Civil Rights eras of the 1960s and, arguably, define much of the structure of modern Western civilisation.

One of the most fascinating and subversive critiques of the schizoid nature of postwar America, where technology alternately promised Utopia or Armageddon, was that of the contactee movement. Aside from a few odd cases of physical, psychic or telepathic extraterrestrial interaction, it began in 1947 in the aftermath of Kenneth Arnold's report of 'flying saucers', when people began to claim contact with alien visitors.

Various sociocultural factors – religion and science fiction, consumerism and Cold War politics – contributed to the phenomenon; certainly the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1950) and Ray Palmer's "Shaver Mystery" (1945–49) inspired contactees as much as silvery objects in the sky.

The first contactee to

garner national attention was George Adamski, who in 1952 encountered Orthon, a Germanic, golden-haired 'space brother' from the planet Venus. Nuclear tests had brought the war-torn and now atomically threatened Earth to the attention of the Venusians.

Adamski's contact experience (a combination of racism, earnest expressions of peace and love, and outright fraud and hucksterism) set the tone for many of the contactee experiences that followed. There was, moreover, a religious element to Adamski's encounter, as Adam Gorightly and Greg Bishop demonstrate in their enjoyable new encyclopedia of contactees, *A for Adamski: The Golden Age of UFO Contactees*. This element recurred in other alleged visitations from benevolent yet otherworldly angelic space beings with names like Ashtar or Aura Rhanes, who came from planets – nearby and far-flung, hidden or undiscovered – bearing exotic names such as Clarion or Meton.

Since Jim Moseley's debunking efforts of nearly 50 years ago, it has seemed fairly obvious that Adamski, with his science fiction and Theosophy-influenced occult roots, was primed to use the newly-minted (and wildly popular) flying saucer mythology to disseminate messages of peace, love and interstellar brotherhood. He and the contactees who followed him could change their inconsequential or fundamentally unhappy lives, surrender themselves to groupthink, or perhaps turn a quick buck selling Venusian hair, weather control devices, rejuvenation machines, psychic readings, bizarre health

### "The contactee movement mirrors the 1950s: Utopian promise or dystopian nightmare"

remedies, and other forms of snake oil and questionable technologies.

Bishop and Gorightly provide brief, capsule-like, yet informative and precise entries for all the best-known contactees: Adamski, George Van Tassel, George King, Truman Betherum, George Hunt Williamson, Dorothy Martin, Dino Kraspedon, Meade Layne, Billy Meier, Daniel Fry, Orfeo Angelucci, Woody Derenberger, Howard Menger, Ted Owens, Elizabeth Klarer, Sun Ra, Charles Hickson, Wilhelm Reich, Trevor James Constable, Ruth Norman, and Claude Vorilhon. The authors also unearth less-known yet equally fascinating contactees, including Erika Bertschinger of the weird German apocalyptic cult Fiat Lux; Michael Cecil and his flying saucer trip to Hell; Orville T Gordon's lumberyard-based UFO landing strip, the 'Armageddon Time Ark Base'; Ralph Lael and his 'Space Mummy'; Dick Miller's Kla-La hoax recordings; John Stuart's salacious, X-rated encounters; the beautiful, yet tragic, Omec Onec, who claimed to be a Venusian that took over the body of a dead girl; and 'Vivenus Starchild', who allegedly inhabited Viv, her human doppelgänger, a failed singer who'd committed suicide.

The authors note that Adamski's benevolent Orthon

and the proto-love-in atmosphere of George Van Tassel's Giant Rock Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention (a gathering of contactees, New Age eccentrics, and gawkers, held annually from 1954 to 1978) contrast with Williamson's claims of alien influence on ancient civilisations a decade before von Däniken's popular ancient astronaut hypothesis, or Albert Bender's visitation by the menacing, ghostly Men in Black that occurred roughly

contemporaneously with Adamski's initial encounter.

This distinction illustrates how the contactee movement mirrors the highly anomalous decade of the 1950s, an era of either Utopian promise, where meetings with our extraterrestrial brothers and sisters would lead us into a new Golden Age... or threaten us with a potential dystopian nightmare.

The contactee movement, therefore, anticipates the counterculture and New Age philosophy, as well as the modern abduction and exopolitical themes of the UFO phenomenon.

Hovering around all this interplanetary brotherly love are conspiracy theories about governmental knowledge of crashed flying saucers and subsequent alien colonisation of Earth; this was, after all, pre-Kennedy assassination and Watergate America, years before governmental conspiracies became vogue. Gorightly and Bishop distinguish between crashed saucer encounters and a number of early contactees, including Antônio Vilas Boas and Betty and Barney Hill, whose



Continued on p62



# Sacred autopsy

Mesopotamia's culture of divination, odd though it now appears, stabilised its society

## The Art of Divination in the Ancient Near East

Reading the Signs of Heaven and Earth

Stefan N Maul

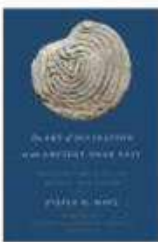
Baylor University Press 2018  
Hb, 359pp, \$59.95, ISBN 9781481308595

I can't get raw sheep liver, so I'm trying Old Babylonian divination another way, through the interaction of oil and water. The oil sinks, quickly rises, and spreads over the water. It would be a troubling sign were I about to embark on a military campaign. This method is described in *The Art of Divination in the Ancient Near East*, Stefan N Maul's engrossing tour through the blood-soaked world of Mesopotamian augury. This was a trailblazing work when originally published in German in 2013, and so it remains in this first English translation. Maul – an Assyriologist at the University of Heidelberg – is a leading guide through the topic, as well as a noted primary-source translator.

A wish to know the future is a timeless human concern, and Maul's handle on the topic's earliest surviving documents shows how ancient Mesopotamians arrived at their predictions. Moreover, he explains the myths and social structures that surrounded the divinatory practices. It's a worldview that believed in total interactivity between human beings and their gods; people were obliged to sacrifice food and drink to them, in exchange for occupying a divinely stabilised cosmos. However, stability was

not always a guarantee, and a divine offering might be rejected as unworthy.

Thus, careful observation and measurement of natural phenomena were used to assess the acceptability of an offering. In the case of a predictive sacrifice, the components of the universe under review were sheep guts, with the animal's liver and gallbladder under most scrutiny. An order of religious specialists, called diviners, carried out the organ examination, technically known as an *extispicy*. This concluded not with some poetic Delphic puzzle, but instead with a definitive yes or no verdict.



Maul reveals the legalistic quality to this style of divination. The artful language came more often when crafting the question, to which the diviner provided a pass/fail answer.

Maul does a fine job of explaining the basics of his subject, only to coil back like entrails to complicate the established fundamentals. Yes, the sheep sacrifice was most common, but diviners could also forecast with birds, grain, oil, or incense. And while answers were often binary, certain markings on a liver could prompt a free-associative analysis.

Close to the king and able to influence him, diviners grew in power and influence. They would become a professional class. Later, the diviners would see their art eclipsed by the popularity of astral divination. Yet no matter the form – from sacred autopsy to stargazing – Mesopotamian divination involved mythological practices that were anything but arbitrary. Though bizarre or barbaric in a modern light, these workings effectively helped stabilise humankind's earliest complex cultures.

Michael Pursley

Continued from p61

largely negative experiences with non-human presences align more closely with the later, more pessimistic abductee narrative of subsequent decades.

Entries are arranged alphabetically, and the volume is illustrated with hundreds of black and white images, many of them rare or previously unpublished photos from Van Tassel's Giant Rock convention; Gorightly Press also offers a more expensive edition with colour reproductions.

Featuring equal amounts of serious research and sly humour, *A for Adamski* is a worthwhile, enjoyable addition to any UFO library and an excellent reference source.

Eric Hoffman

★★★★★

## The Spectral Arctic

A History of Dreams & Ghosts in Polar Exploration

Shane McCorristine

UCL Press 2018  
Pb, 265pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, £22.99, ISBN 9781787352469

What is it about a wasteland that fascinates us so? Is it the fanciful notion of self-discovery and encounter with metaphysical truths, or the battling against the odds both physical and mental at any cost? Whatever it is, we appear to embrace the wild and the wonderful, whether as participant or spectator.

In *The Spectral Arctic* Shane McCorristine considers how the search for the Northwest Passage in the 19th century and the many tragedies it engendered became a significant cultural preoccupation; an interface between the natural world and supernatural desire – spectral and exotic. However, what we find is not a routine account of derring-do but an investigation into how the Sir John Franklin expedition of the 1840s and the loss of life of the crew and Franklin himself provided a gateway for such practices as remote viewing, dream analysis, mesmerism and psychic questing to enter public discourse. *The Spectral Arctic* moves away from routine historical accountancy



into discursive tropes more familiar to hauntological and psycho-geographical studies and in so doing unravels the traditional male-oriented narrative of discovery.

At the heart of the story is the quest for the Northwest Passage, a traversable corridor between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans that would revolutionise commercial and military opportunities for vying Western colonial powers. Shrouded in mystery and lacking any coherent reconnaissance, the unexplored polar regions of the far north-western American continent were initially colonised by the Hudson Bay Company in the 17th century. The passage itself remained elusive and remained so even though such maritime experts as John Barrow, an Admiralty Secretary, inaugurated scientific missions to the region between 1818 and 1848. These early missions saw such notable explorers as John Franklin, James Ross and William Parry pursue the big prize of discovery, one which would ensure wealth and fame. At home the mystique of the quest and the intractable difficulty of the land itself

were amplified by pseudo-religious speculation of a polar paradise and hollow Earth theories. The Arctic became a magical space and McCorristine describes how increased contact with Inuit culture, alongside the isolation and sensory deprivation experienced by many sailors, was reflected in the epiphanic and meditative nature of

their diaries and log books. He suggests Western rationalism proved fragile when subjected to the seductive yet alien Arctic landscapes; an interzone embodied by the fate of Sir John Franklin and his crewmen.

Setting off in 1845 *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror*, captained by the experienced Franklin and a crew of 128 men, attempted to locate the final stretch of the Passage before becoming icebound at King William Island in 1846. Inuit accounts describing starving Westerners, sickness and cannibalism fuelled media doom-mongering, all of which proved true as rescue missions unearthed letters confirming Franklin's death and





abandonment between 1847 and 1848. A failure to evidence the loss of the two ships prompted Franklin's wife Jane to call upon an unlikely band of scryers, mesmerists, crystal-gazers and clairvoyants to occupy the vacuum created by the state's failure to return her husband; the supernatural had entered public and political debate. Such beguiling characters as clairvoyants Sophia Cracoft and the 'Seeress of Bolton', Emma, along with their 'managers' Joseph Haddock and Joseph Hands held the ear of Jane Franklin and exploited their public visibility to promote their unique talents and Spiritualist beliefs – grief was good for business, McCorristine reflects. Indicative of this new approach was Leopold McClintock's mission of 1857 which was prompted by a psychic conversation that identified the location of *HMS Erebus* via remote viewing!

The history speaks for itself but what distinguishes *The Spectral Arctic* is the enfolding of more esoteric, anthropological and psychological discourses within the factual accounts. McCorristine explores how contact between Inuit peoples and sailors during icebound episodes promoted understanding and the recalibration of one's place in the Universe. This, combined with expanded consciousness as a result of isolation, invests the Arctic with a significant metaphysical hue. Unusually for the time, the author reflects, the Franklin incident empowered the voices of women, working class women to boot, within the clairvoyant community and the media at large. The Arctic, it seems, favoured the subaltern voice! McCorristine's account of the literary and artistic response to the tragedy and the public's appetite for all things polar positions the Arctic as a unique psychosocial space – one in which human nobility effected through bravery, compassion and selflessness becomes the strange bedfellow of all that is alien, enervating and disruptive.

A title for the psycho-geographer, historian and fortean alike as the

ground covered is extensive. Academic but highly readable and entertaining, the text is supported by excellent notes, an exhaustive bibliography, illustrations and index.

Christopher Josiffe

★★★★★

## Bridging Two Realms

John Holland

Hay House 2018

Pb, 236pp, resources, £10.99, ISBN 9781781806975

Speaking directly to those enduring bereavement, John Holland, a spiritual medium ("internationally renowned" and "much sought after", apparently) aims to help you "connect to your loved ones who have passed" and, along the way "build a bright bridge to your own spirit". Those *FT* readers to whom these well-meant words offer some light in their gloom of grief might be interested to learn more. To those more doubtful amongst us, it seems rather like a self-important farrago of New Age blathering and spiritualistic wishful thinking.

Bob Rickard

★★★★★

## Fran of the Floods

Alan Davidson & Phil Gascoine

Rebellion Press 2019

Pb, 112pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781781086728

With the rise of the Extinction Rebellion direct action movement and the Friday Pupil Protests, the subject of climate change seems more in the news than ever. Forty-three years ago, a British comic

was already tackling this subject. *Fran of the Floods* by Alan Davidson and Phil Gascoine ran in *Jinty* throughout 1976 and has been collected by Rebellion Publishing for the Treasury of British Comics imprint.

*Fran of the Floods* follows Frances Scott as the world is affected by changing climate (in the story caused by the Sun sending out an extra flicker of warmth) and rising sea levels flood Great Britain. Throughout the collection, Fran loses her family and has to try and survive as she encounters gangs, disease and possible starvation.

The effects of the climate disaster in the story are

well thought-out, with real consideration given to the impact of such a disaster. For me there were echoes of another Seventies classic: the TV series *The Changes*. I'm sure *Fran of the Floods* will appeal to fans of that particular style of social disaster that the British landscape seems to lend itself to (think *War of the Worlds*, *Day of the Triffids* and, more recently, Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*).

The language of *Fran of the Floods* may seem a bit mannered to a contemporary audience, but after a few pages this becomes less noticeable.

Phil Gascoine's monochrome artwork (which will be known to anyone growing up at the time and reading comics such as *Bunty*, *Look In* and *Battle Action*) is strong. The panels have to get across the movement of water and the threat that poses in very little space, as well as the reactions of people in a traumatic situation, and throughout they achieve this time and time again.

Rebellion Publishing's Treasury of British Comics could be seen as bringing back curios for people reminiscing about their childhood, but the subject matter of *Fran of the Floods* shows that it is often worth revisiting and can still have a relevance for the conversations we're having today about climate change and the environment.

Steve Toase

★★★★★

## Presence of Life

Eric Hoffman

Dos Madres Press 2018

Pb, 128pp, \$18.00, ISBN 9781948017169

Although not the first, it is useful to have this elegant and spacious version of Empedocles by himself. As with all the others, he is usually subsumed into catch-all manuals of the Pre-Socratics (e.g. Kirk & Raven).

As Hoffman's introductory note puts it, "This is a translation of a translation. Or, better yet, a version of a version". What this means is that he has poeticised Brad Inwood's (2001) "intentionally inelegant translation". No mention of the earlier (1981) standalone one by MR Wright.

Hoffman is (in America) a well-known poet with something of a cult following. It is not

clear if he knows Greek. Given that he is aiming at a general readership of poetry-lovers, the volume would have benefited from some introduction to the life and works of Empedocles that would clarify the context of his fragmentary verses.

Empedocles operated in fifth-century BC Sicily. He apparently wrote two poems, 'On Nature' and 'Purifications' – some think there was only one. Seventy new lines were discovered (1994) on a papyrus, making him the only Pre-Socratic known directly to us without second-hand intermediaries. He was certainly the most conceited, almost a god in his own eyes, well described by Armand Leroi as "Jesus with an ego, Zarathustra with attitude, prancing around Sicily performing miraculous cures to adoring crowds" – sounds like a 1960s cult leader. Inevitably, like Pythagoras, he believed in metempsychosis, claiming to have been a girl, a fish, a bush. Nevertheless, he pioneered botany and the study of respiration, whilst his belief that human life originated in the sea and gradually adapted its physical forms give him some claim to being a proto-Darwin.

Most famously, he leapt into Mount Etna to prove himself a god, the effect somewhat spoiled by his leaving a bronze clog behind. This had the unfortunate consequence of inspiring plays by Holderlin and Matthew Arnold (worse, with Robert Browning his *Muse*). Scottish poet Momus provides (2015) a happier legacy, singing of this fiery finale on his album 'Scobberlotchers'. Best of all, this anonymous distich quoted by Bertrand Russell:

*Great Empedocles, that ancient soul,*

*Leapt into Etna, and was roasted whole.*

There is little here for professional Empedocleans, except to follow form and quibble over translation details. But as the *TLS* reviewer of a newly-Englised *Works and Days* concludes: "By translating Hesiod as poetry, AE Stallings encourages us to realize that the poem should not just be the object of scholarly study, but can be read aloud for fun".

Barry Baldwin

★★★★★





# Africa unveiled

Reveals an unfamiliar age, and its magical rhino, camel-headed snake god, and politics

## The Golden Rhinoceros

Histories of the African Middle Ages

Francois-Xavier Fauvelle; trans: Troy Tice

Princeton University Press 2018  
Hb, 264pp, illus, notes, gloss, bib, ind, £24.00, ISBN 9780691181264

Drawing upon disparate and often fragmentary textual sources, maps, artworks, archæological evidence and artefacts, *The Golden Rhinoceros* is a thrilling digest of Africa during the Middle Ages.

We discover the scale and exuberance of the Nubian, Malian and Zimbabwean kingdoms among many others occluded by histories written by outsiders. The interplay between Christian, Muslim and Jewish powerbrokers and traders is explored within a broader context of stories of first contact, monumental kingdoms and diplomacy.

The 30+ chapters take us on a journey through the centuries; whether dealing with excavation reports that recover occulted histories such as that of the Land of Ophir in the 14th century, or how the magical Golden Rhinoceros of the 13th century Kingdom of Mapungubwe (South Africa) was discovered, each chapter is never less than fascinating. Equally compelling are the accounts of early expeditions embarked upon in the absence of reliable intelligence and unspecified aims.

Much of the historical record would not seem out of place in a fantasy novel, as an early chapter on Chinese exploration of the continent demonstrates. Zheng He, for example, a Chinese Muslim eunuch and emissary of the

Ming dynasty (1368–1644), led two expeditions into the Horn of Africa in 1417–19 in search of exotic goods.

Without Muslim, Jewish and Christian entrepreneurs, Fauvelle reminds us, our knowledge of the continent and its peoples would be scant. Journeys made by the 10th century Arab explorer Al-Masudi in search of ambergris described in *Meadows of Gold* document trade across the Sea of Zanj and within the Swahili kingdom.

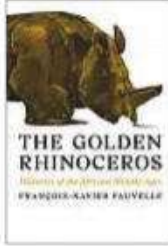
Our understanding of the early history of Mauritania and Ghana is attributed to Arab accounts from the ninth to the 14th centuries. Giovanni Marioni, of the 15th century Genoese multinational Centuriones, ventured into the Algerian wastelands in search of gold. Arriving at the oasis of Tuat, he discovered a marketplace administered by Jewish traders.

Much of the book looks at the conflict that arose from imperial and religious ambition. Many of the African elites pragmatically converted to Islam, whose beneficence, we discover, was reinforced by tales such as that of King Wâr-Djâbî ibn Râbîs, whose conversion marked the end of a drought.

Whether your interest is in the exotic, such as the Kingdom of Zâfûn and its camel-headed snake deity, or in the colonial project under the direction of Vasco De Gama, this is a tremendous read, engaging and wondrous in its ability to conjure times and places that have been neglected. It is fully annotated and illustrated with an excellent glossary and index.

Chris Hill

★★★★★



## The Norse Myths

Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes Vividly Retold

Tom Birkett

Quercus 2018  
Hb, 320pp, illus, bib, ind, PRICE????, ISBN 9781786488824

From Marvel’s *Thor* films to the *Vikings* television series and 2018’s *God of War* video game, Norse mythology may be more prominent in the media than it ever has been. This prominence has led to a wave of popular books aimed at explaining the mythology behind these stories. Dr Tom Birkett’s *The Norse Myths* is one such volume.

Birkett retells the stories of Norse myth in a straightforward, readable style. The stories of the Poetic and Prose Eddas are here, as are the those of the Volsungasaga, the tales of Ragnar Lothbrok, and a number of the Sagas of the Icelanders. Birkett also includes a short section on Viking history to put the tales in their context. In addition to all of this, there’s also a short section on the modern history of Norse mythology, including some good discussion of the roles these myths have played in the imagery of 19th-century nationalism and of Nazism.

*The Norse Myths* is lavishly illustrated, including not only examples of art and artefacts from the Viking age but also images showing the various ways in which modern artists have interpreted and presented Norse mythology. The wide range of art reproduced here adds another layer to the book, making it not only a collection of these stories but a visual history of modern readers’ reactions to them.

Birkett’s writing is engaging and accessible, and the book is visually impressive, but there’s little really new in *The Norse Myths* for more experienced students of Norse mythology – almost all of the primary sources are available in affordable English translations, and the history is only an overview. The short section on modern reception of Norse myths is worth a read, though. *The Norse Myths*’ ideal reader is more likely to be someone only slightly familiar with Norse mythology who wants



a clear overview of what we know in a single convenient volume. For that reader, Birkett’s book is a strong choice.

James Holloway

★★★★★

## Stranger Than Fiction

Essays by Mike Jay

Daily Grail Publishing 2018  
Pb, 320pp, illus, notes, £10.99, ISBN 9780994617644

Mike Jay has written a dozen fascinating features for *FT*, on subjects including temporal lobe epilepsy, Ferdinand II of Tyrol’s Cabinet of Wonder, Alan Sokal’s hoax paper on the “hermeneutics of quantum gravity”, and

James Tilly Matthews’s ‘Influencing machine’. *Stranger Than Fiction* gathers 24 essays written over many years and all of interest to forteans. Topics include Charles Bonnet syndrome; Borneo’s megalithic culture; hallucinogens in ancient Peru; Tanna’s cargo cult; Illuminati conspiracy

theories; William Sargant and “brainwashing”; Lewes bonfire night; paranoid delusion and popular culture; futuristic scenarios of human evolution; and the spread of tobacco as the first global drug (known initially in England as “smoke drinking”). There are also drug-themed essays on De Quincey, Humphry Davy, Berlioz, Sherlock Holmes, and James Lee. I was particularly intrigued by “The Fruitful Matrix of Ghosts” about ST Coleridge. “A lady once asked me whether I believed in ghosts and apparitions,” wrote the Romantic poet. “I answered with truth and simplicity: No, madam! I have seen far too many myself.” He accepted neither the religious nor the rationalist take on psychic phenomena, but believed in the powers of the mind to shape reality. He coined a new term to describe such experiences: supersensual. This carries less metaphysical baggage than supernatural, but has not entered the language like another of his neologisms, psychosomatic. Enlightening and entertaining.

Edward Young

★★★★★





# The SF and fantasy round-up

David V Barrett on a haunted house (with a twist), insurrection on an inhospitable planet, remaking (and copying) humanity, a magical detective (and astrologer) and Jack the Ripper

## Other Words for Smoke

Sarah Maria Griffin  
Titan Books 2019  
Pb, 319pp, £8.99, ISBN 9781789090086

## The City in the Middle of the Night

Charlie Jane Anders  
Titan Books 2019  
Hb, 485pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781785653193

## stronger, faster, and more beautiful

Arwen Elys Dayton  
HarperVoyager 2019  
Pb, 374pp, £8.99, ISBN 9780008322403

## Green Jay and Crow

DJ Daniels  
Abaddon Books 2019  
Pb, 338pp, £7.99, ISBN 9781781086445

## Lies Sleeping

Ben Aaronovitch  
Gollancz 2018  
Hb, 406pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781473207813

## The Magick of Master Lilly

Tobsha Learner  
Sphere 2018  
Pb, 472pp, £8.99, ISBN 9780751562132

## Realities

Roz Kaveney  
Plus One Press 2019  
Pb, 334pp, £15.50, ISBN 9780997745313

In the last couple of years I reviewed two astonishing first novels here, Sarah Maria Griffin’s *Spare and Found Parts* and Charlie Jane Anders’s *All the Birds in the Sky*. Both authors have more than lived up to their promise with their second novels. Griffin’s *Other Words for Smoke* is more than a story of a haunted house. To escape their warring parents, twins Mae and Rossa spend two summers with their Tarot-reading great-aunt Rita and her troubled ward Bevan. But the house is also home to a friendly talking cat – and an owl that

emerges from the bedroom wallpaper, wanting blood. The cat and the owl, and Rita, have been there for decades; the backstory is revealed a little at a time. We accept the weirdness, because we see it through the eyes of the characters – and the joy of both this and Anders’s novel, as with their first books, is that the characters are real, alive and believable.

Centuries ago, humans came to January, a planet with a light, burning hot side and a dark, freezing cold side, and settled precariously along the line between the two. Anders’s *The City in the Middle of the Night* is mainly about Xiosphant, a regimented city, where young student Sophie is banished into the inhospitable wilds for a minor infringement. Mouth is a young smuggler working the hazardous terrain between Xiosphant and another city, Argelo, which is more free and open, but considerably more dangerous; she and her gang get involved with Sophie and her former room-mate to try and overthrow the constrictive rulers of Xiosphant. The relationships between the characters are fraught and fragile – but the real star of this novel is its setting; the world-building of this narrow strip of habitable land and its indigenous inhabitants is astonishing.

When surgery moves beyond reconstructive and cosmetic, it aims to make us *stronger, faster, and more beautiful* – the lower-case title of an unusual novel by Arwen Elys Dayton. It’s actually six linked short stories, beginning with a youth who is given the organs of his comatose twin sister so that one of them might live. An obnoxious religious protestor in this story is at the heart of a later story, proving the adage that converts

are always the worst... These powerful stories, all involving believable young people whose bodies have been remade in one way or another (one swims with fish which grow new organs for humans; another is an asteroid miner), are full of emotional pain and moral questions with no simple answers. A powerful read.

*Green Jay and Crow* is a strange novel. A woman with a disabling illness has a 3D-printed copy of herself made. The copy, known as Eva but thinking of herself as Green Jay, moves into a small town where she befriends a couple of young men and the alien Tenties, who have shape-shifted into more-or-less human form. There’s also a couple of shape-shifting robots who spend their time as street entertainers. The situation is original, but the storyline is weak: one of the young men time-hops, sometimes with Eva, into near-future versions of the town, encountering versions of the gangster-type boss of the place – and sometimes versions of himself. It’s enjoyable enough if you’re not too bothered about a coherent plot.

Ben Aaronovitch’s latest *Rivers of London* novel, *Lies Sleeping*, has our magic-trained detective Peter Grant finally hunting down Martin Chorley, the Faceless Man, and needing help in stopping London being destroyed from the one person he really can’t trust, his former colleague Lesley May, who betrayed him way back in the sequence. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed the previous books, but this one failed to connect. Rather than a standalone novel, it reads as just another instalment of Peter Grant’s overall narrative; the story doesn’t get going till half way through; there’s more police procedural than magic; and the humour that was a feature of the previous books is

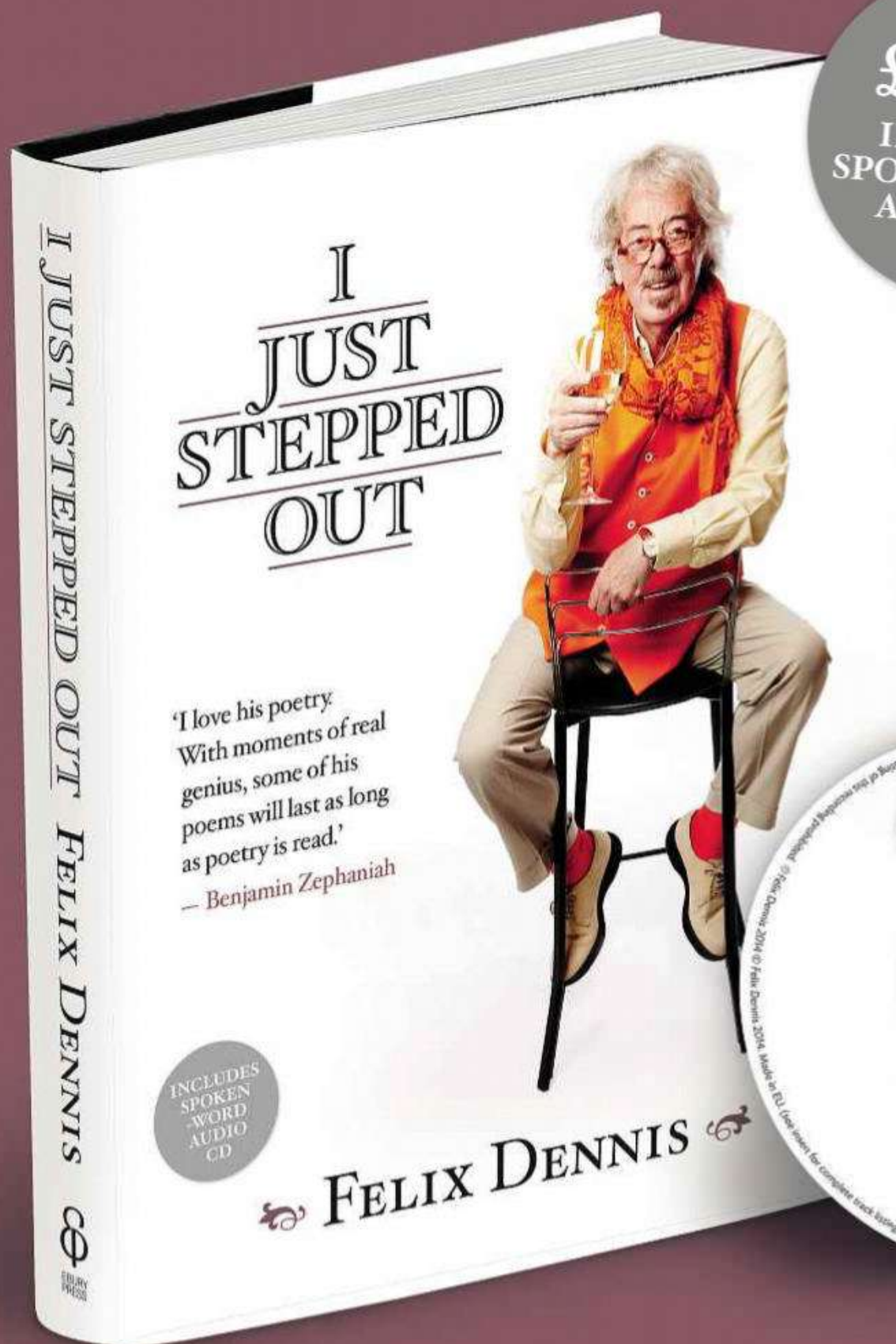
in very short supply. It’s also full of typos. These days you almost expect poor proof reading from small publishers – but Gollancz?

Tobsha Learner is an Australia-based historical and erotic novelist who has turned her attention to one of England’s best-known astrologers in *The Magick of Master Lilly*. William Lilly, author of the classic work *Christian Astrology*, had to tread a careful path between the two sides in the Civil War; the novel covers the period up to the execution of Charles I. Both Lilly and the fraught political and religious setting are nicely realised, and his (fictional) affair with a high-born Royalist lady is delightfully sexy; but the voice lets the book down. There’s rather too much of “Pray, to what effect are thou in London? ... Methinks the King is imprisoned...” A lighter touch would have worked better.

*Realities* is the fourth in Roz Kaveney’s superb ‘Rhapsodies of Blood’ series. Maya, the Huntress, still walks up and down history to stop those who gain god-like power through the shedding of blood, while not taking on godhead herself; this time she comes up against another powerful hunter, Cernunnos/Herne, and a very malevolent Jack the Ripper with quite a different agenda than we might imagine. She also, at last, spends time with Emma, the young woman who got caught up in supernatural fights in the present day, and who has recently not only become a god, but is in charge of Hell, which again isn’t at all how we’ve been led to imagine it, and who has finally got her dead girlfriend back in the flesh. It’s an amazing read, playing with history, mythology and folklore with equal measures of fear, fright and above all fun. Highly recommended.



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## The other Captain Marvel...

The latest big-screen adaptation of a DC comic book eschews the clunking grimness of earlier efforts and delivers a pleasurable dose of old-fashioned magic



### Shazam!

Dir David F Sandberg, US 2019  
On UK release

It's barely been a month since we were presented with the origin story of the character who is currently known as Captain Marvel (and has been since Marvel Comics introduced the character's first incarnation in the 1960s.) With *Shazam!*, we get the origin story of the character formerly known as Captain Marvel during the golden age of comics, namely DC's Shazam, the super-powered alter ego of teenager Billy Batson.

As this is a rare comedy from DC, the film's marketing material has been sure to put the fun, goofy sensibilities of the character at the forefront, but thanks to the disjointed and largely lacklustre instalments in what was once supposed to be DC's equivalent to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there has been much speculation that

*The film is imbued with a refreshing yet old-school comic book energy*

*Shazam!* was merely another weak attempt in DC's failed quest to compete with the MCU.

I'm glad to report that nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than the usual grim and murky narratives associated with recent DC films, *Shazam!* is imbued with a refreshing yet old-school comic book movie energy, bringing the magic back to the franchise's cinematic offerings. Add to that copious amounts of genuine wit and sincere warmth, and we have the most well-rounded DC film since *Wonder Woman*.

The film is brightly fantastical, with a dark undercurrent of relatable human themes. The

film balances these elements perfectly, lending the narrative depth, and also perfectly encapsulates the contrast between the troubled foster child Billy Batson and the formidable superhero Shazam.

One might think that the contrast between Billy and Shazam would prove jarring, but thanks to Asher Angel's grounded portrayal of Batson, the fantastic nature of Shazam is satisfyingly rooted in reality once Zachary Levi takes over as the big red cheese. Proving an inspired choice for the role, Levi never loses sight of the importance of conveying the personality traits of his teenage counterpart, just as he expertly gets across the innocent joy a child would surely experience on finding himself able to transform into a fully grown superhero.

Angel's Billy has great chemistry with Jack Dylan Grazer's mouthy Freddy Freeman, and their friendship also

translates to Levi's interactions with Grazer; not only does Levi have excellent comedic chemistry with Grazer, their shared talent for snappy delivery is also used to great effect, resulting in plenty of laughs throughout the film.

Continuing the theme of contrasts, Mark Strong's portrayal of Shazam's arch nemesis Dr Sivana is a fittingly OTT super villain, which further underlines the childlike sensibilities that saturate the film. Where the scenes with Shazam exploring his newfound abilities bring the comedy, the portions of the film centering around Dr Sivana are eerily dark, establishing him as a genuine threat before the two clash in a classic showdown that has quite a few surprises in store for the viewer.

Just as Marvel has seen many of its greatest cinematic successes in bringing some of its more obscure comic book characters to the big screen, it seems that DC may find success in moving away from the omnipresent Batman and Superman and giving other characters the big-screen treatment, whether it's the empowering Wonder Woman, the preposterously over-the-top Aquaman or the witty Shazam!

By recognising the narrative strength that lies in the unique traits of individual heroes, *Shazam!* manages to be two hours of unadulterated joy, and serves as a reminder that while DC may have another of their trademark dark delights in store for us later this year with the upcoming Joker movie, they can nonetheless also excel with more lighthearted stories and characters that reconnect us with our inner child, or – in Billy Batson's case – our inner superhero – and that is well worth the price of admission.

Leyla Mikkelsen





## THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! ([www.peterlaws.co.uk](http://www.peterlaws.co.uk))

### Puppet Master: The Littlest Reich

Dir Sonny Laguna and Tommy Wiklund, US 2019  
Lionsgate Home Entertainment, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

A comic book artist, wallowing in the misery of a recent divorce, finds unexpected solace in a true crime convention that commemorates the 30th anniversary of the 'Toulon Murders', in which a mad Nazi named André Toulon embarked on a brutal killing spree using deadly clockwork puppets. Delegates to the con excitedly bring their original Toulon dolls to the convention hotel, hoping to make some serious money on the collectables market – but the spirit of Toulon is back, and he's possessing the dolls and reviving them as hardcore Nazi killers.

I guess it's this last part, the Nazi part, that might make some viewers turn off in disgust. Especially when the growing pile of victims share a common demographic: they're gay or Jewish, black or gypsies. That, and the juvenile nature of the extreme and relentless gore,



*Toulon is back, possessing the dolls and reviving them as hardcore Nazi killers*

could be easily dismissed as horribly exploitative; but there's something cleverly transgressive about it all.

The screenplay is by Steven Craig Zahler, a writer of Jewish heritage, who seems to gleefully parody the Nazi mindset. Like the bit where a guy

destroys the Junior Führer doll (a baby Hitler, complete with nappy and toothbrush tash). He throws it into an oven saying, "Let's see how you like it!" Is this in bad taste? Of course it is! But that doesn't make it wrong. At one point, early on, a Jewish Toulon collector tells his baffled wife why he collects Nazi memorabilia. It gives him a sense of mastery over evil, he says. You get the feeling that Zahler, the real puppet master here, feels the same way and is doing something very similar – even when it's his own pen that condemns that same Jewish couple to be burned alive within seconds of the above conversation. Zahler, by the way, is a gifted novelist and film-maker. His directorial debut, *Bone Tomohawk*, was a fantastically thoughtful horror Western which became a darling of the critics. How cool, then, to see him equally at home in a high number sequel (it's the 13th entry, and actually a reboot) in a thoroughly B-movie franchise.

As this is the first in the 'Fangoria Presents' movie stable, you'd better brace yourself for Braindead levels of gore: like the scene with the pregnant women (crikey!) and the decapitation in the toilet (wow!). It's extreme enough to slip into comedy, but your jaw may still drop, just the same. There are some perfectly pitched comedy cameos too. Like horror icon Barbara Crampton as a funnily serious cop and Michael Pare, the detective who gets the killer line: "This incident is turning into a happening!" There's even a score by Italian horror maestro Fabio Frizzi.

It's sometimes patchy, and *Puppet Master: The Littlest Reich* won't please everybody, but bold viewers are going to find their strings happily pulled by a handsome-looking and well-made entry in the Fangoria franchise, one that also has a sting in the tale: a sharp, subversive wit.

### Arctic

Dir Joe Penna, Iceland 2018  
On UK release from 10 May

The cinematic sub-genre of survival films has always had an obvious appeal: such films can tell incredibly engaging stories about the fortitude of the human spirit, which is compelling on a level as primal as the survival instincts the protagonists must tap into in order to overcome their obstacles.

On the other hand, it's also a genre that can all too easily let the premise of any given scenario become absurdly far-fetched, which has the opposite effect of alienating its audience, leaving them incapable of investing in the plight of the characters onscreen.

With *Arctic*, we thankfully have an example of the former type of survival film. Much like the frigid, frozen wastes of its titular setting, the film is stripped down to the bare minimum in terms of geography, characters and verbal expression. This minimalist approach also extends to the narrative, as no background story is explicitly offered for how Mads Mikkelsen's Overgård managed to land himself in such a desperately isolated predicament. Instead, we are left to piece such story elements together for ourselves as they are only presented to us when it is appropriate for the character. This ensures that convenient exposition dumps are avoided, and viewers can walk in the frostbitten shoes of the protagonist as he meticulously and robotically carries out various repetitive tasks to maintain some semblance of a routine, while he patiently waits to be (hopefully) rescued.

Since these mundane routines create a grounded framework for the narrative, the various dangers and plot twists effortlessly ebb and flow throughout the film, giving it a distinct, well-paced progression that ensures the story unfolds in an organic manner and keeps the audience invested: one is kept firmly in the dark while still having a firmly structured narrative arc to follow.

The perils are believable, albeit they do seem to happen in rapid succession; but if any genre can get away with things increasingly going from bad to worse (and then some), it's surely the survival film. Again, what grounds these







at times insurmountably unfair challenges is the overarching framework of the untold backstory, which continuously adds weight to the challenges our hero inevitably must face.

The obvious centre of the film is, of course, Mikkelsen's performance. With no conversations to be had in the film, Mikkelsen can't rely on other characters to help him tell his story. Impressively, however, he still manages to express an array of emotions that fill in the narrative gaps, thus painting his character as a fully realised human being fighting to survive.

Despite its modest budget, *Arctic* impresses with sombrelly beautiful visuals that convey just how isolated its protagonist is in the vast wasteland, as stunning as it is treacherous. Hitting every narrative beat almost a little *too* well, the film may not be a ground-breaking piece of cinema, but it is nonetheless a compelling, self-contained tale that will intrigue fans of survival films with its realism and appeal to broader audiences thanks to Mikkelsen's subtle yet deeply expressive performance.

Leyla Mikkelsen



## Hush... Hush Sweet Charlotte

Dir Robert Aldrich, US 1964  
Eureka Films, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

Thanks to the TV series *Feud* a couple of years ago, there has been an upsurge of interest in the careers of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, which of course intersected with the filming of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* in 1962. It was a big box office hit at the time, and Robert Aldrich and 20th Century Fox wanted to cash in by making another film along similar lines with the same stars. The vehicle chosen was *Hush... Hush Sweet Charlotte* but, due to the mother of all feuds breaking out between Davis and Crawford following the release of the earlier film, the latter dropped out of the production (either through genuine ill health or a desire to get away from the poisonous, Davis-dominated atmosphere on set) despite having already filmed many of her scenes. Olivia de Havilland was quickly

subbed in to replace her.

Despite these production difficulties, in my opinion the second film is actually better than its more famous predecessor. Davis plays Charlotte Hollis, an eccentric Southern belle who has lived alone in her crumbling mansion ever since the violent unsolved murder of her lover many years before. Facing eviction due to proposals to build a new highway on her property, Charlotte asks her elegant cousin Miriam (de Havilland) to come to her aid. The upheavals prey on Charlotte's unstable mind to the point where she begins to suspect that she is going insane and, indeed, that she may have been the murderer all along.

It's a hoary old plot, but that doesn't matter, because the charms of this film are all to do with its cast and director. These days, if such a thing as an all-star cast exists at all, it's probably only to be found in a big Marvel film; cost, as much as anything else, mitigates against having too many superstars in one film. But here you have a cast made up of genuine old-school legends, and what's more they're all women. Aside from Davis (who is on career-best form here) and de Havilland there are Mary Astor, best remembered as the quintessential femme fatale in *The Maltese Falcon*) and Agnes Moorhead, who was *Citizen Kane*'s mother. Along for the ride are Joseph Cotton and, as the doomed lover, an incredibly young-looking Bruce Dern.

It's not exactly a horror film, although there's one particularly gruesome murder, more of a Hitchcockian thriller and Aldrich does a superb job of recreating the master's style. There are superb sequences – such as Charlotte waking in the night to find a cleaver embedded in the ballroom floor, and the appearance of a ghost at the top of the stairs – but the real delight is watching four grand old dames of the golden age of Hollywood gathered together in one film and having a blast.

The Blu-ray transfer is very good, as are the extras: the interview with Bruce Dern – who tells some funny and touching stories about the shoot – is worth the price of the disc alone.

Daniel King



## BLU-RAY AND DVD

### 1984

20th Century Fox/HMV, £12.99 (Blu-ray)

This release of Michael Radford's film, released in 1984, demonstrates how eternal Orwell's themes were. Written in 1948, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s depiction of a world of fake news, political demagogues and rhetoric-stirred mobs is, as ever, seemingly but a step away from our present day. The power of the novel tends to overshadow any adaptation, but this is a stylish and enjoyable rendering which still packs a punch. Gaunt John Hurt was born to play Winston Smith, his nervous energy overflowing into passion and then sheer terror as he finds love (in Suzanna Hamilton's ethereal Julia) and is then punished for his rejection of the ruling Party's values by state interrogator O'Brien (a chilling Richard Burton in his final film role). The world of ruined cities and simple but horrifyingly effective torture techniques is a recognisable one, close to what we might see on any news channel. The music is the one element which potentially dates the film, but the idiosyncratic soundtrack still compounds the oppressive atmosphere. **Martin Parsons** ★★★★★

### THE DEVIL HUNTER

88 Films, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

A beautiful model is kidnapped and smuggled into the jungle – but her abductors are the least of her problems. It's the tribe of cannibals and their bug-eyed devil God that really give her a headache. Director Jess Franco is revered in some horror circles for his occasionally thoughtful and artistic approach to cinema, and there are certainly snippets of a deeper talent here – nice tracking shots, for example, or the social commentary on the barbarism of the modelling industry in the film's first few minutes. But it's trashy status is confirmed with idiotic characters, an anæmic story and seemingly eternal shots of 'natives' dancing around a totem. Pervs are going to like the lingering zooms on crotches (a Franco staple), but there are so many that even the sweatiest viewers might get bored. The demon God, with his ping-pong eyeballs, is at least unique. One could say that *Devil Hunter* is an essential watch, but only if you've made a personal vow to see all 72 of the UK video nasties. **PL** ★★☆☆☆

### A TRIP TO THE MOON

Dir Joaquin Cambre, Argentina, 2017. On limited UK release

This wafer-thin coming of age drama from Argentina concerns Tomas (Angelo Mutti Spinetta), a troubled and introverted boy whose love of astronomy is the only thing that gives him respite from his earthbound worries. His brassy but loving mother (Leticia Brédice) badgers him to take his medication; his flirty sister annoys him; and his kind but slightly dodgy father is largely absent. His one friend is pestering him to steal an exam paper so he won't have to repeat a year of school. Then, one night while staring through his telescope at the Moon he is distracted by Iris (Ángela Torres) a pretty girl who lives in the opposite block. Their friendship leads Tomas to discover for the first time emotions such as attraction, desire and frustration. That's pretty much all the film offers – that is to say, a selection of familiar stock characters and nothing that you haven't seen in umpteen films before. Its one trump card – a half hour sequence where Tomas fantasises about taking his family on a mission to the Moon – is well-realised, but it's not enough, and in any case comes way too late. Writer-director Joaquin Cambre is obviously passionate about his material, and I would imagine that it has strong personal significance for him, but he hasn't managed to translate that into a film which has significance for the viewer. A well-intentioned but inert disappointment, I'm sorry to say. **Daniel King** ★★★★★





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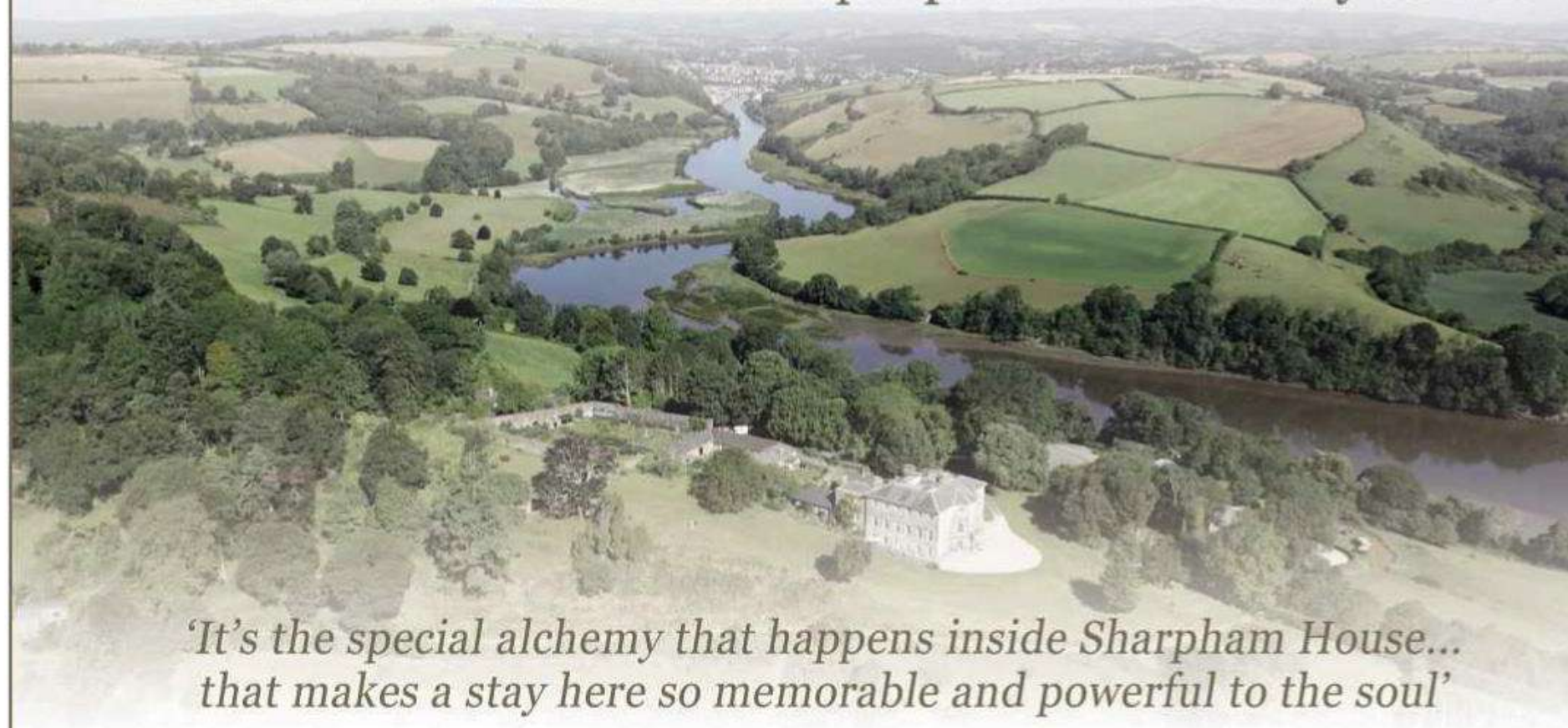
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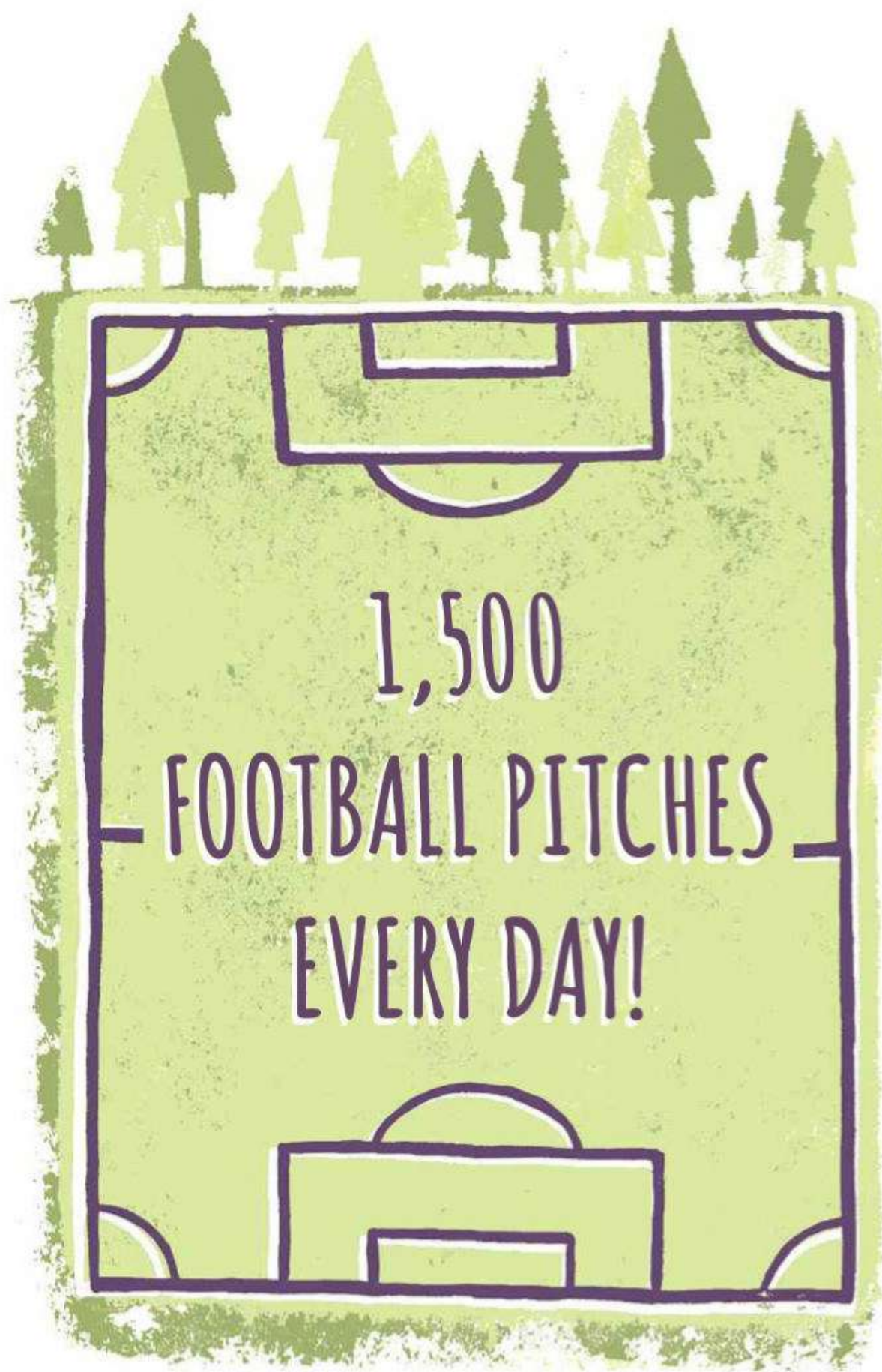
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# LETTERS

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## Psychosocial overreach?

Luis R González [FT377:74-75] criticises my article 'The Cosmic Joker' [FT376:30-35], and appears to endorse the extreme version of the psychosocial hypothesis (the notion that *all* purportedly paranormal incidents could be explained in prosaic terms if only sufficient information were known about them). He points out that even advocates of alternative hypotheses accept that as many as 90-95 per cent of UFO cases have a psychosocial explanation. However, that doesn't compel us to conclude that the remaining 5-10 per cent also do. By the same token, observing that many people are right-handed doesn't justify the inference that *no one* is left-handed.

In my article, I cited examples of what I call 'overlap cases' – cases featuring anomalous phenomena belonging to different traditional categories. In his last paragraph, González blithely dismisses them as being explicable in prosaic terms. His message seems to be: "As I've decided that paranormal manifestations don't occur, I can dismiss *a priori* any reports of supposedly paranormal phenomena." That strikes me as being decidedly unscientific.

**Peter A McCue**

*By email*

## Staring goldfish

Experiment Six of Gordon Rutter's 'Citizen Forteana' feature [FT378:58-59] – sensing someone is looking at you – brought back memories of the first occasion I remember it happening to me. A few years ago, one dark winter's evening, I was engrossed in a good book when a feeling of great unease came over me. It was the distinct impression that someone was staring at me. Being the only one in the house and the curtains being closed, I cautiously scanned the room. The cause? All the goldfish were all lined up in a row, staring intently in my direction. I am more used to the feeling these days. It occurs daily when my dog thinks it is time she was fed!

**Jane Claringburn**

*Carlton, Nottingham*

## SIMULACRA CORNER



## Bosky drama

Dave Pratt and his son spotted this menacing critter climbing slowly towards them up a hill on the path from Pooley Bridge to Howtown on Ullswater. Meanwhile in Dalkeith Country Park near Edinburgh, Ian Messer noticed this running tree.

*We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.*

## Two decades of weirdness

That's it, a red-letter day: FT377 has just dropped onto my doormat, which means I've now been reading this amazing publication every month for 20 years. I received FT120 through the post when I was a nipper of 25, and ever since through the ups and downs of life you and your writers have been there to intrigue, fascinate and occasionally amaze me. You have been a constant presence, via subscription, or when times have been hard – WH Smiths. My whole collection is carefully filed, and a perusal is one of the best ways to spend a wet Saturday afternoon. Thank you *Fortean Times* for making my life a more interesting experience. Long may you reign.

**Arthur Burton**

*Maidstone, Kent*

## Adventurous seals

Reports of a seal four miles from the sea in the fens [FT377:10] come as no surprise to those of us who live there. Seals are sometimes found some 40 miles (64km) from the sea ([www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-cambridgeshire-32693355/seal-spotted-40-miles-away-from-sea-in-st-ives](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-cambridgeshire-32693355/seal-spotted-40-miles-away-from-sea-in-st-ives) and [www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/local-news/seal-spotted-swavesey-flooding-cambridgeshire-14491401](http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/local-news/seal-spotted-swavesey-flooding-cambridgeshire-14491401) for example). We even occasionally get porpoises in Cambridgeshire waters. The countless rivers, fen drains and other waterways means that seals often venture far inland.

**Mark Greener**

*By email*

## Drunken Crows

Back in January, I was walking across Figges Marsh in Mitcham, southwest London, and saw a gathering of nearly a dozen crows all drinking out of discarded lager cans. I had never seen anything so amusing and extraordinary! A couple of the birds were flat on their backs with their wings outstretched and legs in the air, another couple were arguing and fighting over the last dregs in a can, whereas some other birds seemed to find



# LETTERS

everything hilarious!

I have heard the expression ‘stone the crows’ – but have never seen stoned crows.

**Phil Brand**  
London

## Balancing act

I somewhat agree with Robert Irwin, as quoted in the editorial, when he says that our beloved Charles Fort “was not interested in explanations” [FT377:2]. He simply presented the damned data, with his own tongue-in-cheek take on it, with an implied “Explain that!” to the scientific world, but with no expectation of receiving an answer. At least that’s how I see it. However, in this day and age, improved communications enable a huge number of people to become aware of, and comment on, anything at all that occurs almost anywhere in the world. This means that the supporters of fringe theories, for example, have an equal chance of being heard as the sceptics and scientists, and I believe that FT ably reflects this. A memorable example of this is the two articles you ran on the Moon Landing some years ago. The first article [FT94:34-39, Jan 1997] claimed it was faked, and provided photographic evidence and coherent arguments to that effect. In a later issue, those of the contrary opinion took the evidence and arguments apart, piece by piece [FT97:22-27].

I believe you have exactly the right balance.

**Dave Miles**  
By email

I picked up on the phrase ‘benevolent scepticism’ a while back as a way of explaining to people that FT wasn’t just a believers’ Bible. I’ve subscribed for many years now and read FT cover to cover without fail. I think the balance is about right. I read too many UFO books a few years back that said “Surely the evidence is now overwhelming” to which the glaringly obvious answer was “No it isn’t!” I guess you sort of reflect my view – that there are things that get marginalised and dismissed when there might actually be something ‘real’ going on – but you also recognise that people can’t just believe stuff because it appeals (though many do I guess). On the other hand, you also give space to more speculative and outlandish stuff – so I give respect where it’s due.

**John Parkes**  
Leeds, Yorkshire

The last Editorial asked readers for their views on whether the magazine is still too sceptical regarding its coverage of marvellous enigmas – particularly ufology [FT377:2]. In short: yes.

In her book *The Dual Soul Connection, The Alien Agenda For Human Advancement*, New Zealand UFO researcher, lecturer and experimenter Suzy Hansen writes: “The word ‘corroboration’ given to me by a Grey being was a major turning point for me, because seeking corroborative evidence relating to my experiences engendered confidence at a time when abductees/experiencers were being subjected to derision by the media and public

in general” (p.265).

So you can see how frivolous comments (which FT is infamous for) are insulting and hurtful to everybody involved in UFO incidents – including those sim-

ply fascinated by the subject.

It is the reason why affected parties rarely write to *Fortean Times* about their sightings and associated exposure to the phenomenon – leading you to observe that nobody reports UFOs anymore. Well – not to you they don’t. You could remedy that of course.

**Mike Prentis**  
Nottingham

## Hardly a cryptid

Karl Shuker [Alien Zoo, FT376:22] describes the finding of the leopard eel, *Siren reticulata*, as a “major vindication of the classical cryptozoology method”: following up on local reports of a mysterious, unfamiliar sounding beast and obtaining physical specimens, then subjecting them to formal zoological examination, culminating in determining new species. This, however, isn’t cryptozoology, just zoology. According to the researchers themselves (<http://www.livingalongsidewildlife.com/2018/12/song-of-siren-story-behind-how-we-found.html>), the delay in recognising this animal was because it just took too long to formally describe. The animal was first found in 1970 and mentioned in a reference on Alabama herpetology in 1975. Hundreds of them were documented in 1994. Yet, it wasn’t formally described. (There aren’t that many salamander experts.) As noted in Dr Shuker’s piece, several were caught during the time the write-up was in process. It took until 2018 for the journal article to be published. This sounds nothing like a classic cryptid because it wasn’t hidden – they found them when they looked. If we dilute the idea of a “cryptid” to be a species that hasn’t been formally introduced to the world (or remains in a laboratory jar or museum drawer), then the specialness of cryptozoology (large, infamous mystery creatures having aspects of legends and folklore) is entirely lost. It does highlight the fact that the definition of cryptozoology remains unresolved.

**Sharon A Hill**  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

## Jack the Ripper

It was good to see that my old friend Richard Whittington-Egan’s book on Jack the Ripper reviewed [FT377:63], albeit with some inaccuracies. Since he was born in 1924, his ‘claim’ to have visited the Ripper’s scenes of crime in the 1930s is nothing but the truth: he told me about it when he took some leave from Stonyhurst to visit Whitechapel, speaking to some elderly people who had witnessed the Autumn of Terror first-hand. Richard’s first Ripper book, published in 1975, was a rather modest effort, but his *Jack the Ripper: The Definitive Casebook*, published in 2013, is much better; the book under review is not a third edition, just a paperback reprint published posthumously in 2018. Finally, although the late Nick Warren published the *Ripperana* journal for many years, the better-known *Ripperologist* is quite another magazine, still published today, albeit in e-format only.

**Jan Bondeson**  
Cardiff, Wales

## Not dreamed of

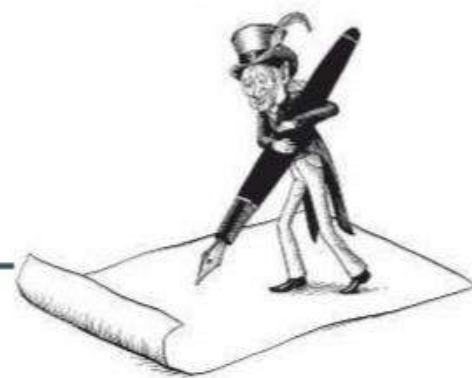
In reply to Martin Stubbs, (Hardly Withering, FT377:73), the popular Shakespearean quotation (“more things in heaven and earth...”) doesn’t mean “Well, you don’t know everything”, and only “sounds classier” because it is classier. It doesn’t refer to a relative deficit in the steady accumulation of knowledge between the quoter and their target, but points out that whatever philosophical system one uses to establish the legitimacy of knowledge, whether the belief that certainty can be achieved by observation and experiment, or by divine revelation, or by any number of systems popular with us humans, there will always be an actual Universe beyond the limits and restrictions of our structures, a greater, wilder space. The points where that space intersects with our conceptions, causing friction, causing anomaly, are the point and purpose of this magazine we all enjoy so much.

**Dean Teasdale**  
Gateshead, Tyne & Wear



Alien plumber





## Disorientation

I was interested to read Bob Bray's letter about his experience at Southport [FT375:77]. I have just finished reading a book about people with brains that do unusual things: *Unthinkable* by Helen Thompson (John Murray, 2019). 'Sharon', one of the people in this book, has a brain condition called "developmental topographical disorientation disorder". She suffers permanently from the condition that seems to have afflicted Mr Bray temporarily. Perhaps this condition could explain some of the stories of people being taken by the fairies to strange places or the feeling that you have slipped into another dimension or alternative Earth. Sharon lives in Denver and the mountains she can see from her front door are (to her mind) sometimes to the north and sometimes to the south. She has to avoid curving roads, as they tend to bring on the disorder more than straight roads. Interestingly, she can get her sense of direction back by spinning around – she got the idea of doing this from the spinning that Wonder Woman does to move around. Perhaps Mr Bray had a temporary attack of this disorder. I live in Canberra, the capital city of Australia, and the city has few straight roads apart from three-lane highways – the suburbs have roads that curve around, sometimes in complete circles. I find that it is very easy to lose one's sense of direction when driving along these roads, especially as they are mostly lined with gum trees that all tend to look the same. I find that the problem is exacerbated by the fact that the only visible landmark – the hill on which Parliament House is built – is in the centre of the city and so offers no orientation point. If I am walking, however, I do not have this problem.

Like Mr Bray I too have sat in a stationary car and felt it move. When I got out to see what was happening, I found that my experiences were caused by the air moving inland from the sea up an incline and under the car. If Mr Bray and his friend were sitting above a lower level, that

might be the cause of the shaking. It is a rather disconcerting feeling and the only reason I was brave enough to get out and look (it was dark out) was because staying in the car and feeling the shaking was more scary than getting out – and I had a boyfriend with me.

The Human brain is a wonderful thing but it does have its flaws, especially as it evolved to keep us from being eaten by things with bigger teeth than we have and we are now living in an environment that it seems to find confusing at times.

**Margaret Pitcher**  
*Canberra, Australia*

## The missing tower

The image of hyperpedestrians Zanardi and Vianello posing in St Mark's Square, Venice, in 1909 [FT376:39] is remarkable, not only for what appears in the foreground, but for what is missing from the background. The huge tower of St Mark's Campanile has stood in its present form since 1513, and from the viewpoint of the photograph would normally obscure the view of the Porta della Carta entrance to the Doge's Palace, to the right of St Mark's Basilica. However, it fell down on 14 July 1902. According to JG Links, "No dancer could have fallen more gracefully, if she had to fall. Hardly any damage was done; no one was hurt." The Venetians rebuilt it as an exact replica, with work being completed in 1912. The Zanardi and Vianello photograph therefore captures one of the very few years in which the view of the eastern end of St Mark's Square was unobscured either by the Campanile, its rubble, or the rebuilding work.

**Grant Hutchison**  
*Dundee, Scotland*

## Beware the harginn

I found a fascinating account in the *Trenton* (New Jersey) *Evening Times* on 23 Sept 1893 of a mystery animal, under the headline "The Flying Porcupine", though the word "jumping" might be more appropriate:

"There is a curious Dardistan



## Floater ID

The first shape or animal Leslie Vinson is enquiring about ['Optical phenomena', FT369:76] is surely Peru's

totem animal, the Puma. Please compare his 'small black dog' floater to these puma statues.

**John Eastman** *By email*

superstition with regard to an animal called 'harginn', which appears to be more like a porcupine than anything else. It is covered with bristles. Its back is of a reddish brown and the other parts of a yellowish colour. The animal is supposed to be very dangerous and to contain poison in its bristles. At the approach of any man or animal it is said to gather itself up for a terrific jump into the air, from which it descends unto the head of the intended victim. It is said to be generally about half a yard long and a span broad.

"Lal Mohammad, a saintly Akhunzada, but a regular Munchausen, affirmed to have once met with a curious incident with regard to that animal. He was out shooting one day when he saw a stag which seemed intently to look in one direction. He fired off his gun, which,

however, did not divert the attention of the stag. At last he found out what it was that the stag was looking at. It turned out to be a huge 'harginn', which had swallowed a large markhor with the exception of its horns. There was the porcupine, out of whose mouth protruded the head and horns of the markhor. The Ghilgiti, on the contrary, said that the harginn was a great snake, 'like a big fish called nang'. Perhaps harginn means a monster or dragon and is applied to different animals in the two countries of Ghilghiti and Astor – Dr Leitner in *Asiatic Quarterly*."

Dardistan was a name given to the regions of what is now northern Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir. A markhor is a large wild goat that lives in this area.

**Richard Muirhead**  
*Macclesfield, Cheshire*



# IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

## Liscard encounter

In 1999 I was working in a craft/hobby shop on a busy main road in Liscard – which is on the Wirral over the River Mersey from Liverpool. One day in late July or early August my friend Simon with whom I worked decided to go and get some fish and chips for lunch – which would take 20 to 30 minutes on foot.

Just after he left, all the noise from the main road stopped – Jenny Randles has called it the Oz factor – and the weirdest man walked into the shop with two children. He was about 6ft (1.8m) tall with an olive complexion and a 1970s afro hairstyle. He was dressed in a green waterproof PVC jacket, brown corduroy trousers and green Wellington boots. Both the children looked *exactly* the same as him, but in miniature. He told them to wait by the counter, which they did. They stood in front of me and stared straight at me, which was very disconcerting. I got the impression that they were a boy and a girl; I'm not sure how I came to that conclusion as they were both identically dressed, but one had slightly 'bigger' hair. Meanwhile, the man walked around the shop but didn't seem to look at anything until he came to a display box of Balsa wood. He picked up a small length of wood and asked me what it was. When I replied that it was Balsa wood he seemed surprised and repeated "wood" a couple of times. He then asked how much it was and when I told him it was 17 pence he took out a wallet and produced a £20 note, asking if this was enough – to which I replied Yes, more than enough. The bank note was brand new but looked like plastic – just like our current £5 and £10 notes. He put it back in his wallet, looked at the two children who hadn't moved, and they walked out of the shop together. I watched them leave and then suddenly I



could hear the traffic again.

The next thing Simon came back in. I was confused because the whole incident had only seemed to take about five minutes. I told him what had happened and he assured me he had been gone about half an hour. We had a security camera in the shop. When we played it back it showed Simon leaving the shop and returning, but the strange visit had not been recorded; there was just half an hour of blank tape. It was all so strange – not scary, just weird. It was as if someone had studied the time period but not got it quite right... 1970s instead of 1990s... Winter instead of summer.

**Geoff Stanley**  
*Llangefni, Isle of Anglesey*

## Once in a lifetime

Here [above] is a photo of an impressive 'light shaft' at sunset on 26 May 2018, taken from my window. The phenomenon lasted for several minutes. I'm sure this can be explained as 'ice crystals in the atmosphere' or something, and as a meteorological, or even fortean, phenomenon it's probably not very much. The interesting thing is that this is the *only* time

I've seen it, having lived in the same flat for 24 years.

This brings me around to something that may be characteristic of many fortean phenomena, namely the 'once-in-a-lifetime' coming together of circumstances, causing something irreproducible and often inexplicable to happen. For example, one day some years ago the railings on my balcony were bedecked with the most amazing glittering, multicoloured jewellery. This was nothing more exciting than water droplets after a shower, illuminated by the Sun from a particular angle and elevation. But again, it was 'once-in-a-lifetime' – I've never seen it before or since.

Another example: I live about half a mile from a busy motorway. Usually I can't hear the din of the traffic, but under certain atmospheric conditions (I suppose it is) I can hear it as a soft murmur or, more rarely, a considerable hum. One day many years ago I suddenly heard distant change ringing. Now, change ringing from church steeples is totally unknown in Norway – our churches aren't equipped for it. The only conceivable source for it was the traffic noise,

which apparently was being modulated in such a way as to produce discrete bell sounds. It must have been a singular, one-off confluence of atmospheric conditions.

**Nils Erik Grande**  
*Oslo, Norway*

## Strange eyelashes

I think this strange encounter happened on Sunday 15 June 1980, when I was 22. Anyway, it was definitely a Sunday, as the bus service was poor. It was a fine morning and I was walking along Copnor Road, Portsmouth, from my home in Glenthorne Road, Copnor, to my parents' house in Milton Park Avenue, Milton. As I approached Copnor Primary School on my left [pictured on facing page], I could see a frail-looking old lady holding onto the school railings for support with her right hand. Even from some distance away, I could see that she wanted to speak to me. Having no desire to stop I tried to avoid her gaze, but as I approached she said "Excuse me young man, may I ask you a few questions please?" Not wishing to appear rude, I agreed.

I can't recall the questions in detail, but they concerned truth in human relationships, husbands, wives, fidelity, trust, honesty, and finding yourself being used by other people. However, I clearly recall her final statement: "Well, thank you, young man, for taking the time to speak to me today," and I replied, "That's OK, you are welcome." I felt happy that I had cheered up an old lady, but I was concerned about her obvious frailty and hoped she wouldn't try and cross the busy main Copnor road, as I felt she wouldn't make it; so after I had walked a very short distance I turned to check on her wellbeing – but she had vanished! Perplexed, I retraced my steps and walked all the way back to the corner of Burrfields Road and the Star and Garter pub junction, checking the side



roads and shop doorways on the way, but she was nowhere to be seen. I set off again for Milton, very puzzled.

The old lady wasn't very tall. She was dressed in a full-length dark green coat with a long dress underneath. Her appearance was unexceptional, except for the movement of her eyelids, which opened and closed much slower than normal. Furthermore, each eyelash had a tiny ball on the tip, something I have never seen before – or since.

Thinking back, I feel that our meeting might have been in the nature of a warning regarding the questions I was asked. Shortly afterwards, I discovered that my then wife was seeing another man behind my back. After she left me, the house in Glenthorne Road was sold and I moved on. When we bought the house in 1978, it was being sold by a chap in the Woking area whose father had lived alone in the house and passed away. Was the woman I had spoken to the wraith of this man's wife looking out for me? I often wondered if anyone else saw her that day while passing on the road, as no one passed us on the pavement. I hate to think I was seen chatting to the school railings.

**Dave Twine**

*Milton, Portsmouth*

Back in 1987 I interviewed three independent witnesses to amphibian precipitation that occurred in July 1954, in the part of Copnor Road where Dave Twine had his strange encounter. One recalled leaving the Tivoli Cinema, nearly opposite the school railings, when she and her parents were deluged by thousands of tiny frogs or toads (see *Animals and Men*, #1). According to local hearsay, an accident victim haunted the milk depot next to the Tivoli Cinema, leaving one room in the building always intensely cold. Both locations are now occupied by modern flats.

**Nick Maloret**

*Milton, Portsmouth*

## Inside number six

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, an area known as Buckland, on Portsea Island in Hampshire, was largely



developed for new housing. For a number of years, entire streets of old terraced houses stood empty, like a small concrete ghost town. As children, my friends and I spent many hours a day exploring these abandoned, deserted former suburbs. One hot summer afternoon, as we sat on the loading bay of a long-closed laundry company, we heard sobbing emanating from one of the houses. Thinking that perhaps someone was in trouble, we went to investigate. The black door to a house, number 6, was opened to the wall, and in the gloom of a narrow passage, at the foot of the stairs, a man was kneeling, his back turned to us, unaware of us watching.

He stood up and turned, holding something in his hands. Walking into the light, the man, who appeared to be about 25, stopped and looked for a long time into the front room. He was crying, and the something he carried was a child's doll, with what looked like darkened, dry blood, or maroon-coloured grease, on one of the arms. I noticed the old-fashioned grey suit and hat he wore, unusual for a young man in the early 1970s, and certainly unusual on such a hot day. After a while he came out onto the street, closed the door behind him, looked hard at the front room window and walked silently away. He never once looked at us or said a word.

Although it left an indelible mark on me, this incident lived mostly in my subconscious for

more than two decades. Then one afternoon, reading through the archives of local news in the public library, researching for a historical thesis, I chanced upon a small article in a yellowed newspaper from November 1938. It told of a man who had returned home, in an area that later became that deserted ghost town, to discover his wife and four-year-old daughter dead, either murdered or as the result of suicide. The man was not a suspect, having been at work all day, and the cause of death was ruled unknown. The house number of the street was given as number 6.

**Stefan Badham**

*Portsmouth, Hampshire*

## Norfolk bliss

I would like to relate a strange event that happened to me in September 2013. My wife and I had been on holiday in Norfolk, staying at a rented cottage in a quiet little village. We had had a lovely week with good weather and some great food and days out.

On our way home, we passed over one of the many canals and rivers that crisscross Norfolk. I can't remember exactly where it was now, but this particular stretch of water was obviously man-made. It was completely straight with gently sloping grassy banks and fresh green reeds at the water's edge. As we passed over it something about the scene with its gently rippling

blue water, clear blue sky and the fresh greenness of the bank and reeds set off in me a sudden intense feeling of euphoria. It was like nothing I've experienced before and I can only describe it as what I would expect a religious revelation would feel like. I've never taken any mind-altering drugs, but would imagine that this was what you might expect. The image of being down amongst the reeds at the water's edge also filled my mind, almost as if I were seeing the scene through the eyes of some water bird or animal. The intense feeling lasted for only a few minutes, but I was able to regain a hint of it by thinking of the river scene, although it was nowhere near as strong as the initial experience. I mentioned it to my wife but she said she hadn't noticed anything unusual.

The next morning at home I took a shower. At that time, we had a white shower curtain with a series of large green spots running in lines. The combination of the white and green and the coolness of the bathroom instantly brought back the same feeling of euphoria – although we'd had that curtain for some time and I'd never had any reaction to it before.

The feeling slowly subsided, but over the next few days I would still get a little of it when stepping into the shower, though each time it grew less and less. I tried to analyse where the feeling may have come from. Maybe as a very young child I had been placed in an environment with the colours white and green on a cool day and it was a safe, happy place and this old buried memory had bubbled to the surface. Or maybe I had connected with the spirit of an ancient Briton hunting for fish and birds in the reeds, waist deep in the cool clear water.

Has anyone else has had a similar experience? I'd like to find the river crossing again and try and reclaim the feeling as it's now completely left me (and we've got rid of that shower curtain). It was a wonderful feeling and certainly a serenely fantastical way to end a good holiday.

**David Ward**

*Newton, Derbyshire*



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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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# PHENOMENOMIX

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS 1

HUNT EMERSON & KEVIN JACKSON

**WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS:**  
WORLD-FAMOUS  
AMERICAN  
NOVELIST!



**AUTHOR OF WILDLY SCANDALOUS  
NOVELS INCLUDING THE NAKED LUNCH...**

Birmingham 1973.  
The very young  
Hunt Emerson reads  
The Naked Lunch  
over two weeks, in  
90 minute bus rides  
each morning to his  
job in a library.

5am. Naked Lunch  
at dawn,  
after his previous  
evening's  
indulgences...



THAT'S HIS BRAIN  
FRIED FOR THE  
REST OF THE DAY!

**HERO OF ROCK STARS...**



**AND ALSO -  
MASTER  
MAGICIAN!**

HEY  
PRESTO



BURROUGHS' FASCINATION  
WITH THE  
OCCULT BEGAN  
WHEN HE WAS  
A SMALL BOY...  
HIS FAMILY'S  
IRISH COOK  
TAUGHT HIM  
HOW TO  
CALL  
TOADS...

Yo!  
TOADS!



IN A LOCAL PARK, HE  
HAD A VISION OF A TINY  
GREEN REINDEER, WHICH  
HE RECOGNISED AS HIS  
SPIRIT ANIMAL!



HIS WELSH NANNY TAUGHT  
HIM HOW TO CURSE...

Trip and stumble,  
slip and fall,  
Down the stairs...

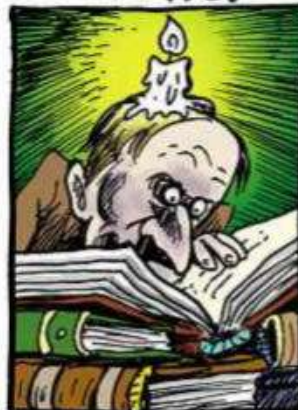


...AND AT SCHOOL  
HE WOULD SLAP  
CURSES ON ANY KID  
WHO OFFENDED HIM!

...and hit  
the wall!



AT HARVARD,  
HE NEGLECTED  
HIS CLASSES  
AND INSTEAD  
STUDIED  
MAGIC!



BUT IT WASN'T UNTIL HE WAS  
MIDDLE-AGED THAT OCCULT  
FORCES REALLY EXPLODED  
INTO HIS LIFE... ONE DRUNK  
AFTERNOON HE DECIDED TO  
PLAY "WILLIAM TELL" WITH  
HIS WIFE JOAN...



AS BURROUGHS LATER RECALLED, AN EVIL SPIRIT  
TOOK POSSESSION OF HIM...

BURROUGHS WAS HAUNTED BY GUILT FOR  
THE REST OF HIS LIFE... AND HAUNTED  
BY OTHER ENTITIES, TOO...



**NEXT TIME** HIDEOUS  
VISIONS!! REINCARNATION!!  
AND LOTS AND LOTS OF CURSES!



# COMING NEXT MONTH



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THE MANY MYSTERIES OF THE APOLLO MISSIONS



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SPOOKS, SPIES & UAPS,  
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AND MUCH MORE...

# FORTEAN TIMES 380

ON SALE 23 MAY 2019

# STRANGE DEATHS

## UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

On 5 September 2018, after a three-month investigation, Nancy Crompton Brophy, 68, of Portland, Oregon, was arrested for shooting dead her husband of 27 years. The body of Daniel Brophy, 63, was found on 2 June in the kitchen of the Oregon Culinary Institute where he was a chef. One clue to the murder was an essay his wife had written called "How To Murder Your Husband", uploaded in November 2011 to a blog called "See Jane Publish". In this essay, Brophy had dismissed the idea of using a hit man because "an amazing number of hit men rat you out to the police". Getting a lover to do it was "never a good idea," she wrote. Poisoning was off the menu because it was traceable and if it failed "who wants to hang out with a sick husband?" She also wrote: "The thing I know about murder is that every one of us has it in him/her when pushed far enough". The following year, she wrote a blog saying her real-life husband "has learned to sleep with one eye open". Brophy had written at least seven novels, mostly about secret relationships between "rugged men and strong women". As well as *The Wrong Cop*, there was *The Wrong Husband*, about a woman who tried to escape her abusive husband by faking her own death. *D.Mail, Toronto Star, 13 Sept 2018.*

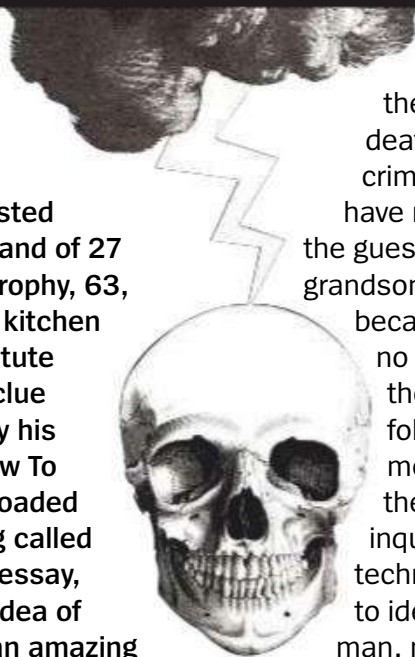
In the introduction to his novel *The Guilty Secret*, Chinese writer Liu Yongbiao revealed he had already started work on a follow-up he hoped would prove a literary sensation: a suspense-filled, cold-case detective drama about a ravishing female author who evades capture despite committing a string of grisly murders. He would call it *The Beautiful Writer Who Killed*. On 11 August 2017 Liu was arrested for allegedly bludgeoning four people to death 22 years earlier. "I've been waiting for you here all this time," he reportedly told police when they appeared on his doorstep in east China in the early hours. Liu was admitted to the China Writers' Association in 2013 and had one book, a work of historical fiction, turned into a 50-episode television series. In the preface to *The Guilty Secret*, Liu told readers he hoped *The Beautiful Writer who Killed* would also be adapted for the big screen.

After his arrest, it was alleged that the defining moment in his life – and those of the four victims – came on the night of 29 November 1995. Police believe Liu was one of two men who checked into a guesthouse in the eastern city of Huzhou in order to rob its guests. When one victim, named

as Mr Yu, fought back against the thieves, he was beaten to death. In order to conceal their crime, the two men are alleged to have murdered the couple who ran the guesthouse and their 13-year-old grandson. The manhunt had gone cold because investigators could find no link between the victims and their killers. "We found it hard to follow the vine all the way to the melon," said Xu Zhicheng, one of the officers involved in the original inquiry. However, advances in DNA technology enabled investigators to identify Liu and a 64-year-old man, named only as Wang, as prime suspects. Liu never did publish *The Beautiful Writer who Killed*, but he wrote a letter to his wife, telling her he had spent more than two decades waiting for the police to come calling. "Now I can finally be free from the mental torment I've endured for so long," he wrote.

The case is reminiscent of that of the Dutch crime writer Richard Klinkhamer, whose wife, Hannelore, vanished in 1991. Following her disappearance, Klinkhamer (**FT135:24**) unsuccessfully attempted to interest his publisher in a gruesome novel in which he pondered seven ways he could have killed her, including, most disturbingly, mincing her remains and feeding them to pigeons. Nine years after she disappeared, Hannelore's skeleton was found under the couple's former home and Klinkhamer confessed to her murder in February 2000. His book was later published as a work of what one Dutch newspaper called "intriguing" non-fiction. *Guardian, 16 Aug; D.Mirror, 17 Aug 2017.*

In September 2017, Blake Leibel, 36, the son of wealthy Canadian real estate tycoon, was charged with scalping Iana Kasian, 30, ripping parts of her face off and draining her of all her blood. She was found dead in a West Hollywood apartment in May 2016, next to the couple's two-month-old baby daughter. An autopsy found she had been tortured for eight hours before dying from her injuries. Her skull was exposed after parts of her scalp and one ear were either cut or ripped away. An injury to her jaw appeared to be human bite marks. Six years earlier, Leibel had published a graphic novel featuring images of naked women being decapitated and hung from the ceiling. The novel, called *Syndrome*, revolves around a psychopathic serial killer who gets sexual pleasure from torturing and killing women. In one scene, the fictional serial killer says: "They kill, we kill. In the end we all become monsters." *Sun, 26 Sept 2017.*





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